Memento Mori II

A Curse of Strahd
Fan Zine

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Memento Mori II

Thank You

I want to thank everyone who contributed to the second volume of Memento Mori. The passion and pure talent put into everyone's pieces, once again, has me in awe. I look forward to hosting more projects with you all in the future. This is not the end of Memento Mori!

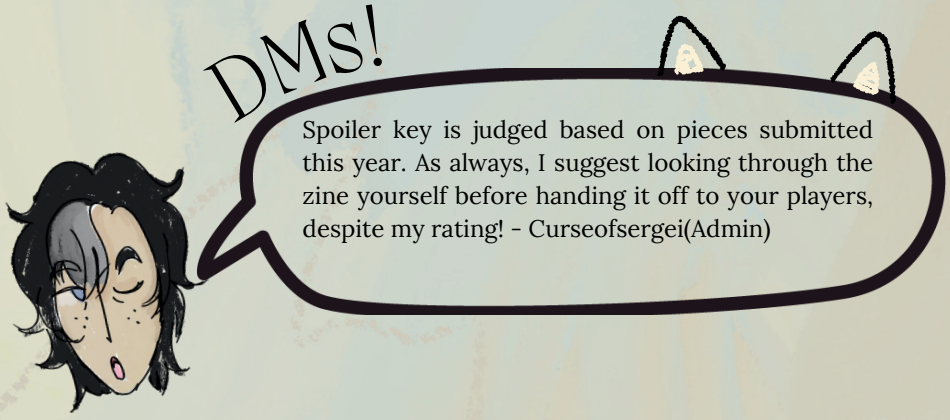
I want to extend a special thank you to the moderators who helped make this project possible, as well as the contributors who stepped up to assist with beta-reading. Our writing contributors appreciate it!

Please Note

This zine is separated into sections to allow those who wish to avoid spoilers to still appreciate the project. These sections are as follows: Barovia, Vallaki, Krezk, Ravenloft, and The Curse. Thank you!

Spoiler Key by Section (For DMS)
☽: No spoilers
☽☽: Mild spoilers
☽☽☽: Heavy spoilers
☽☽☽☽: Major spoilers (Major character death, hidden lore, etc)

Sections
Barovia ☽
Vallaki ☽☽☽
Krezk ☽☽
Ravenloft ☽☽
The Curse ☽☽☽☽


DMS!
Spoiler key is judged based on pieces submitted this year. As always, I suggest looking through the zine yourself before handing it off to your players, despite my rating! - Curseofsergei(Admin)

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COVER ART.....Nouveaumoon

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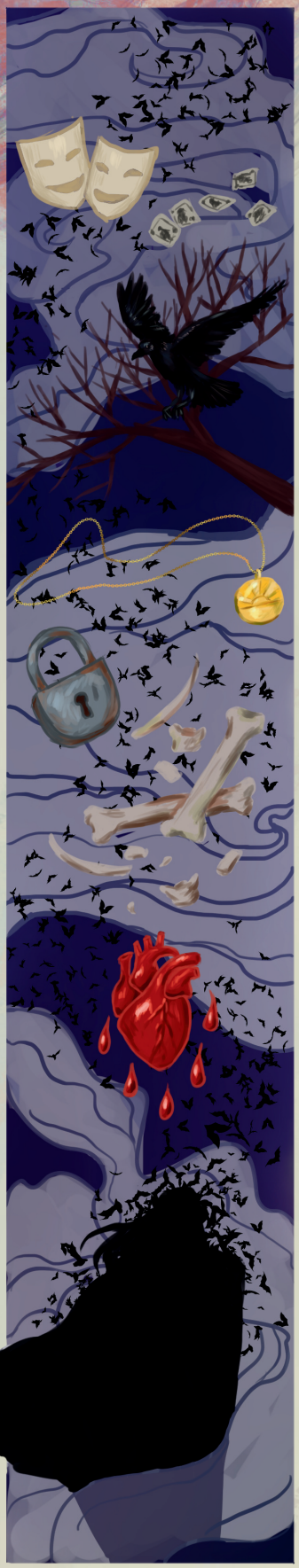
Barovia

featured: ciph3rrr

"They fought me as though I were an ordinary man like themselves, and like ordinary men, they died."

The Road Ahead

Poem by Averysartbox
Illustration by F.T.Petra



Well met, lost adventurer. Now lend your ear,
Something terrible has brought you here.
Through the mists you've been summoned to a land of dread.
Now let us see what lies ahead...

A valley wrought with despondency trapped under a sunless sky;
A cowering domain where hope is robbed under watch of a malevolent eye.

A city of falsehoods and grinning masks locked in stalemate and fear.
Fortune waiting folded in music and fire, and the whispers the folk there hear.

Ancient power hidden in forest branches, guarded by defiant wings,
And their hunters erecting a twisted idol at the shrines of once divine things.

Promises of peace wrapped in sickly sweet lures, tempting the sorrowful to obey.
A forgotten town, its memory drowned, long banished from decay.

A bitter cold in the western peaks and a hunger that gnaws even more.
Guilt disguised as holiness, shaping miracles with a rotten core.

Decaying manors trapped in time, locking secrets in their keep.
And older bones of battles lost where ancient beasts now sleep.

Deeper still, this evil sinks its fangs to massacre and leech,
And there are greater hands at play, and pawns within its reach.

The unfathomable sealed in fortressed halls, now eagerly stirring awake,
And clever sparks in the embers of built upon efforts, with promises to break.

A bleeding heart, though long betrayed, fuels the love that holds this land together.
And a soulless man, who in his bloodlust has cursed this realm forever.

All of these players, woven together with timeless and binding red strands.
And with your arrival, now you too play a role in this abandoned land.

Though the souls you'll find here are empty ones; lost, despaired, and depraved,
There are yet many in this place that still deserve to be saved.

There is much still to learn, and even more to survive.
With the path laid before you, Adventurer,
What will you decide?

Do you think less of me for this?
For not going with the rest of the village?
For being a coward.
You are not a coward, brother.
Ireena-
And no. I do not think any less of you.
@anantmakingart

Reflections from a Nightmare

Story by HopeStoryteller

Character(s): Ireena, Ismark

☽☽☽

Every shadow cast by trees seems to be a threat. The howls of hungry wolves fill the air, and Ireena *has* to get home, or else she'll never see it again.

She's been running for a while, long enough that every step feels like it could be her last. Her lungs gasp desperately for air; her heart throbs in her chest like it's trying to escape something, too.

But Ireena can see the treeline up ahead. Putting on a last, desperate burst of speed, she clears it. She doesn't stop running until her feet carry her into the village of Barovia. Her home. The wolves won't *dare* follow her out of the woods. She's safe.

Except, when she turns back to look at them... hungry, almost-human eyes stare back at her. And as she watches, the largest of the wolves throws its head back with a howl, then begins to pad forward. The others follow suit. Slowly, leisurely. The wolves have all the time in the world, as far as they're concerned.

Ireena doesn't.

She starts running again. If she can just make it a little farther, if she can just make it *home*...

It's not far, she knows that. But she can hear the howls growing louder, the scrabbling of paws upon cobbles. *They're* not far, either.

So Ireena keeps running, darting and weaving through the streets of the village like her life depends on it, because it does. No one would be foolish enough to open their doors to her—to anyone—at night. Her *only* chance is to make it home.

When she does, it's nothing short of miraculous. She nearly collapses against the door from the sheer relief, fumbling desperately for the doorknob—

The doorknob doesn't turn. It's locked. Ireena doesn't have a key. Why did she leave the house, especially at *night*, without a key? She doesn't have time to remember.

She pounds on the door. "Father! Ismark!"

But no response comes from within. The wolves are still following her. There's more of them than there were in the woods, circling her, growling low. The hackles rise on the biggest one. He's preparing to pounce.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. She backs up, then throws herself at the door

with all the strength she has left in her. Maybe she's stronger than she thought, or maybe the door had grown weak with age. But it gives. Thank the Morninglord, it *gives*. She crashes through, directly into someone's waiting arms.

"Father!" she cries out, relieved despite herself, relieved in spite of everything. Here, now that she's made it home, she must surely be safe.

Yet something is wrong. Her father is too pale. As Ireena watches in dawning horror, he staggers backwards, clutching at his chest. He's bleeding, from a wound that looks like it was dealt by a sword.

There's a sword in her grasp, or something like one. The hilt is platinum. Yet the blade seems to be hewn from light itself, if such a thing's possible. Transfixed, she reaches out to touch the blade with her free hand, only to recoil as it burns her.

She's still holding the sword when her father's body crumples into an unceremonious heap on the floor. Only then does it fall. She screams.

"Father!"

The scream that joins hers comes from her brother, who rushes in only to sink to his knees.
"Ismark," Ireena begins, not sure what she could—or should—even say. "I..."

His head snaps up to look at her, his eyes full of hatred. She's never seen him like this before. He's looking at her like he's one of the wolves that have chosen *now* of all times to fall silent outside, or something far worse.

"It's *your* fault," Ismark says suddenly, standing and drawing his sword to point it at her.

"What? Ismark, I don't understand—"

"It's *all* your fault!" He's shouting now, and the next thing she knows, he's charging at her over their father's dead body. Acting on instinct far more than anything else, Ireena screams, snatching up her own sword from the floor.

But the blade is made of nothing but light. Ismark's sword passes through her block easily. Through her own neck just as easily. And Ireena Kolyana dies.

Despite this, her eyes open. Her head is still firmly attached to her shoulders, her hair matted and damp with sweat against her pillow. She is alive, and she is in bed. It was nothing more than a terrible nightmare, that's all... except that it isn't. Except that her father *is* dead. His body had simply given out, he certainly hadn't been *murdered* with a strange sword or at Ireena's hand. Apart from the fact that her father is dead, the nightmare wasn't real in the slightest.

(Yet what if it was?)

☽☽☽

"That is ridiculous," Ismark informs her when she works up the nerve to tell him, sparing no detail, of what terrible things she had dreamed.

"*You* are ridiculous," she counters over breakfast. "...Are you certain?"

Ismark nods. “Dreams reflect reality, Ireena. They don’t affect it.”

“I… suppose,” she says uncertainly.

“Besides,” Ismark says, setting the spoon in his empty bowl and standing, “a sword with a blade of light sounds… *impossible*. Not to mention ill-advised. How would it cut anything?”

“I don’t know,” Ireena admits. “Magic, maybe?”

Her brother shrugs as she finishes her own porridge. “I might not know much about magic, but it seems to me like if I wanted to kill someone with magic, there would be *much* simpler ways to go about it than with a strange sword of light.”

He has a point—he generally does—and that makes her feel somewhat better about the terrible circumstances they have found themselves in. Even so, the frail daylight of a Barovian morning brings Ireena little comfort, overall.

Their father is, and remains, quite dead. He was the burgomaster. Presumably, Ismark will be the new one, considering that he’s older. Ireena will simply do what she has always done, except that she’ll be working alongside her brother alone. Ismark will do a good job, she knows it.

Ireena wishes she could say the same for herself.

☽☽☽

The wolves in reality haven’t returned since the night Ireena’s father died, something that has gone unremarked upon but not unnoticed by both of his children. Yet every shadow beyond the walls of their home, every unexpected noise, has her flinching at them. Ireena finds herself seeing wolves and hungry eyes when there are none, hearing distant howls when others hear not a thing.

It's bad enough that, by the time that she and Ismark have set about purchasing a casket and paying extra to have it delivered, that she flinches when a hand slips into hers. Ireena realizes, seconds later, that it’s only her brother.

“Let's go home,” Ismark says, and she realizes he too looks paler than he should. “We can send word to the Abbot tomorrow.”

“…We can,” Ireena agrees.

Neither of them remind the other that the graveyard where their father will undoubtedly be buried is further from the center of town than either of them would like. Neither of them has to. But Ireena doesn’t let go of Ismark’s hand until they have returned home and the door is securely shut behind them. Ismark only relinquishes the hilt of his sword with the other to fasten the bolt.

Ismark’s other hand has been resting on the hilt of his sword, almost casually, ever since they left home. He doesn’t normally do that. But then, they aren’t normally setting affairs in order after the death of their father.

“Ireena,” Ismark says evenly, turning away from the door. “I don’t mean to alarm you, yet… did it seem to you like we were being followed?”

Followed? No, not exactly. But Ireena couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, which has never been so prominent in her mind and heart before. She has no better way to describe it. So she risks a nod in lieu of trying and failing to clarify.

Ismark sighs. His shoulders slump.

"If I'm to be entirely honest," he admits, "I don't know that we could survive another night's assault from the wolves."

Admittedly, Ireena knows this as well as he does. But she hadn't wanted to say it out loud. Saying such a thing out loud, after all, makes it much more real than it was before.

"How safe *are* we, here?" she whispers, daring to voice the doubt in her own heart.

"I don't know," Ismark replies, subdued himself. "But I wasn't followed when I left the house alone."

What he isn't saying, but they both are thinking, is this: however safe it is for him, it may be far less so for her.

☽☽☽

Another night, another nightmare. Ireena can't recall anything specific about it, this time, when her eyes fly open. Perhaps that is a mercy. She stumbles when she leaves her bed, though she's not certain why. She can't shake the feeling that she was *falling*, in her nightmare, before a very sudden stop.

"You could stay in Vallaki for a little while," Ismark says, that morning, before she can tell him of her nightmare or even decide if she desires to. "Just until it is safer. The village is larger than ours. More fortified."

Will it ever be safer? She wants to ask, but doesn't. In her heart, she knows the answer. Perhaps she's always known the answer.

"I would have to travel *to* Vallaki," she says instead. "It would be much less safe to travel there alone."

"I know," Ismark says.

"And I wouldn't want to leave you alone," Ireena continues.

Her brother, the last family she has left in this life, sighs quietly, and repeats the words, "I know."

She finished breakfast first this time. She stands alone, pushing her chair in, and watches him for a little while in silence.

"...I don't have to take up Father's position as burgomaster immediately," Ismark says at last. "I could escort you."

"And then you would have to return alone," Ireena says.

"There is that," Ismark mutters, looking down. "And I would never be able to forgive myself if I failed to protect you."

Something's changed, hasn't it?

"Ismark," she says carefully, "what has happened?"

For a few moments, he stares intently at the remnants of his own meal, in lieu of an answer.
"I had a nightmare of my own," Ismark says slowly. "You died, because you were here, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. To save you."

From the way he's looking at her, it must have been a terrible nightmare indeed.

"I thought dreams didn't affect reality?" she says, and it's meant to be in a teasing tone, but despite her best efforts she falls ever-so-slightly short of the mark.

"They don't," Ismark says gruffly, setting his spoon in his bowl without finishing. "But they reflect it. I doubt the dream itself means much. But it made me realize some things. We already have to bury Father. I don't want to bury you, too—not for many years to come."

"Nor I, you."

He sighs, and he stands, and he meets her eyes. "I know. As the new burgomaster, I'll be better guarded than you would be. You might not be safe in Vallaki, but… it would be safer."

Safer does not necessarily mean safe. They both know that. She's safer inside their home than she would be on the streets of the Village of Barovia, or in the wilderness beyond—but that doesn't mean she's safe here. Their father wasn't.

Ismark won't be, either. But she can't shake the feeling that he's right about being safer than her.
"If I can find someone better-suited to escort you to Vallaki, then I will," Ismark says after a long pause. "Otherwise… I'll travel with you myself. I'm sure that I could find some mercenary or other traveler willing to accompany the future burgomaster of this village home."

"Do you truly believe that…"

She pauses, considering this. Will it be worth it? Will it do any good? Would it be better to simply die at home, with her family?

"I do," Ismark says, and she wonders what he thinks she was going to say before he circles the table and pulls her into a tight hug. "This won't be forever, Ireena, I swear that to you. We'll see each other again. But you will be safer in Vallaki."

She slowly nods, as she hugs him back. And she wonders—though she says nothing of it to Ismark—whether he truly does believe that the dream he had meant little. She wonders more what else his dream had entailed, for it to affect him so strongly.

Even if she was certain of more, she doubts she could sway him now.

☽☽☽

There are rumors of newcomers to the land of Barovia. A party of adventurers, the heavily-armed sort, from beyond the fog. There have been others, on occasion, over the years. Ireena doesn't recall the last time she heard rumors of such adventurers. Outsiders don't make their way here from beyond the fog often. When they do, they rarely meet with the most fortunate of fates.

But Ismark, when he comes home and tells Ireena of this, is delighted. Relieved, because even if these adventurers are only a little more proficient in combat than he is, the fact that there are more of them means they will be able to protect Ireena better than he could. Logically, she knows this. She even agrees with his reasoning.

And yet… none of *them* are people she knows. None of them are her brother.

Just because she agrees with his reasoning, and how he reached that conclusion, doesn't mean she has to like it. She dislikes it immensely.

"Would you at least be willing to accompany us to Vallaki as well?" she asks, with little hope. "That would solve the problem of an escort home."

For him, at least. For her… for all Ismark is determined that this is for the best, that this will not be forever, she can't help but fear she will never see the village she calls home again. Not in this life. Perhaps in another, if such things truly exist.

(Ireena can't make herself believe they do.)

"Maybe," her brother allows, which at least isn't a no. But it's not a *yes*, either.

Whatever happens, she'll face it as she always has before. Only this time, it won't be with her brother at her back, and that thought frightens her immensely.

It doesn't scare her as much as the wolves did, and do. As much as her recurring nightmares do, and did. So instead of objecting as she might, instead of making her brother listen to her, she swallows her doubts and she nods, and she settles in to wait for the adventurers to arrive. It won't be long now.

☽

Parallel Lines

Story by qreyjoy
Art by anantplayingdnd
Character(s): Ismark, Ireena

☽☽☽

Part One: Ismark

Thirty-four hours, seventeen minutes, and twelve seconds ago, Ismark had entrusted the safety of his beloved younger sister to a group of travelling mercenaries. A risk, yes, but a calculated one. The outsiders seemed trustworthy enough and more than capable of holding their own against the monsters lurking within the mists. Still, with every minute that passed, more knots formed in Ismark's stomach. What if something had happened to them on the Old Svalich Road? Morninglord forbid, what if the devil himself had made an appearance - demanded the group deliver Ireena to him?

It was these fears that pestered the new burgomaster's mind as he returned home after another unbearable day. Overcome with exhaustion, his legs almost buckled beneath him as he opened the front door. For the past several hours, Ismark had patrolled the outskirts of the village with his greatsword. No undead had attacked in days, not since the onslaught which caused Father's heart to burst, but he could not afford to grow complacent. Once the Count discovered Ireena's exodus - and it was only a matter of time - there would be no telling what horrors his anger would unleash.

A night such as this would usually be spent at the Blood o' the Vine tavern. But the thought of facing the patrons' jeers and judgemental stares was too much to bear. Not tonight. Instead, Ismark poured himself a large glass of Purple Grapemash No. 3 and reached for a sheet of parchment.

Ireena,

I don't know if you have reached Vallaki yet. It has been nearly two days and the journey should only take a few hours on foot, so I would hope so. ~~Unless something has gone terribly, terribly wrong. These roads are dangerous, filled with wolves and zombies and ghosts and ghouls and -~~

As if pulling himself out of a daze, Ismark shook his head and threw the pen across the desk. This was a terrible idea. Only two sentences and already he was spiralling, envisioning the worst possible scenarios. The Old Svalich Road was dangerous to travel alone, certainly, but Ireena had not been alone. There was no need to waste precious parchment detailing his fears in such a manner. After taking a moment to breathe, Ismark tore the parchment in two and began once more.

Ireena,

I pray you have reached safety and did not fall into too much trouble on the road. Not knowing where you are, not knowing if you are safe - it eats me alive with worry. I wish I could have travelled with you, but my duties keep me here. Village morale seems to be lower than ever before. Every howl of a lone wolf signals a pack is nearby; every patch of mist conceals a lurking horror. Most of the villagers avoid me. The rest approach me with their petty squabbles, or question what I am doing to keep them safe. No matter what I do, nothing seems to be enough for them. The tavern keeper even said to my face that I am a shame to our father's legacy. That I will send the village into 'rot and ruin.' Part of me suspects that they would not have allowed me back, had I left with you.

I have never felt so completely out of my depth. Father had not prepared a proper succession plan and his estate is a mess. Not that I speak ill of him, of course! He had so much vigor and life within him - clearly, he had not expected to leave us so soon. I just wish he had left some form of notation or guide for me to follow. It helps little that I can barely manage more than an hour of uninterrupted sleep.

The house feels empty without Father. Without you. Everywhere I look, I am surrounded by ghosts. The dining table where we would sup together, the corridor where you would stamp your boots to remove the mud, the bed where his heart gave out... Everything reminds me of what I have lost. I can't stand it.

As the man of the house, I should move into Father's room but it's too soon. The grief is too fresh. I spend more time outside of the house than in it. My days are spent patrolling the village for threats, my nights at the tavern trying to numb the pain. They all watch me. I know they look at me and think about how pathetic I am. The only person who's shown a crumb of compassion is the pieseller Morgantha, who came to our door offering free pies this morning. I am grateful, of course, but I cannot bring myself to eat.

Still, I must not complain. Morninglord, listen to me. Whining about how difficult it is to be stuck here in the village, as if I am the one hunted by the devil! If I could trade places with you and have him pursue me instead, know that I would do so in a heartbeat. You were always better at diplomacy than I. Father believed so too. Give me a longsword over a tax notice on any moon.

It probably goes without saying but I miss you. I will find a way to visit you, I swear. Even if I have to sneak away in the dead of the night. Though perhaps it need not be that drastic - I could write

to the Baron and arrange a meeting to introduce myself as the new burgomaster of Barovia. That should not seem too suspicious.

In the meantime, I will resume my duties as best I can. I will keep working so that if when you are able to return, you will have a better, safer home to come back to.

Yours,
Ismark

No sooner than Ismark had finished the final stroke of the quill than he was interrupted by the unmistakable howling of wolves. The sudden burst of noise sent the quill slipping through his fingers and onto the floorboards below. How could he have been so foolish? The devil watched through the eyes of every wolf; heard every word whispered to the wind. Moving his sister a

few hours up the Old Svalich Road would not be enough to protect her. There was no inch of Barovia where Ireena would be safe, for Strahd was Barovia. And when the devil inevitably came to claim his bride, he would not even be there to protect her. He'd entrusted the safety of the one he loved the most to strangers, all while he cowered at home.

With a mournful wail, Ismark ripped the letter in two.

☽☽☽

Part 2: Ireena

St Andral's Church proved a comfortable abode, if slightly claustrophobic. The Vallakian priest had been generous enough to allow Ireena to take refuge for as long as she needed, asking for nothing in return.

'Our church is a safe haven for all of the Morninglord's children,' Father Lucian had assured her. The dark room was small and lit by a single candle, the only other amenities being a wooden cot, a dusty writing desk, and small chest to store the few belongings she had dared to take with her.

Perhaps more interesting was what the room lacked - a window. While it was comforting to know that the devil could not appear on the other side of it, tempting her to invite him inside, the lack of alternative exit should something appear at the door made Ireena uneasy. Though if local legends were true, the undead would perish should they attempt to breach these holy walls.

Ireena peered at the writing desk. If *he* were planning to claim her, surely he would have made an appearance by now. There had certainly been plenty of opportunities on the journey. Perhaps it was time to write to her brother and let him know she was safe…

My dearest Ismark,

You will be pleased to hear that I have made it safely to Vallaki! As always in this gods-forsaken land, there was some trouble on the road - yet we have all arrived in one piece. I thank you sincerely for these mercenaries you had found to protect me, for I surely would not have survived without them.

Ireena paused to allow herself a laugh. In truth, Ireena was more than capable of defending

herself. Certainly more capable than some of her new companions, who had screamed in fear as the zombies' severed limbs had risen up to attack, seemingly undeterred by their severance from the body. Nevertheless, a white lie would give her brother some comfort; the mists knew he had agonised over entrusting her safety to outsiders.

I should not disclose exactly where I am staying, though to relieve your fears I can assure you that someone in this town was kind enough to take me in. I know you agonised about sending me away, but I know it was in the interest of my safety. I feel no resentment that you stayed behind, truly. You are my only brother and you have always done what is best for me.

I am not so naive as to believe these walls will keep me safe from the devil and his minions forever, but, Morninglord willing, they should keep me safe until he loses interest. How long does it take for a man who has lived centuries to grow bored, I wonder? A few moons? A year? Ten years? I can hardly imagine being away for that long! It has scarcely been a day since we parted, yet I miss you as if it were a moon.

Vallaki is a strange town, to say the least. Having spent my whole life in the village, I suppose anywhere would feel strange. Yet there is an uncanny feeling about this place - for a start, there are walls guarded by men with pikes. The idea of needing to convince a guard you are trustworthy before being permitted entry, that one cannot freely walk through the streets, is worlds away from the village. While I admit this makes me feel safer, I detest the feeling of being watched. The rational side of me knows that they are watching all citizens to ensure they will not cause trouble. The paranoid side of me fears I have been recognised.

Another odd custom is the Baron's insistence on happiness. Several times I have been stopped and commanded to smile! 'All will be well,' they insist on telling me. I have also been informed that later this week there will be a festival dedicated to the 'blazing sun.' It is certainly a change from the dourness of home, to say the least!

Was Vallaki like this when you visited, I wonder? I remember when we were young, when Father had requested you accompany him to a meeting with the Baron. How I had begged him to take me with you, to not leave me home with Mother! How I stamped my feet in protest and hid your belongings, asserting that to leave me behind would be the height of injustice. It is funny how things change. If only I knew that one day, I would be in Vallaki and desperate to return home.

Then I think back to my earliest memories, when I was but an orphan alone in the woods. Sometimes I feel like that scared little girl, terrified of what stalks me in the darkness. But this time, I cannot rely on you and Father to come to my rescue. If I am to survive what lies ahead of me, I need to be strong. I must learn to protect myself.

Your loving sister,
Ireena

As she signed her name, Ireena stared at the parchment before her. She could ask Father Lucian for a wax seal, but who could she trust to deliver the contents? While she had taken care not to disclose her whereabouts in Vallaki, it was said that the devil had eyes and ears everywhere. It would not take long to trace the letter back to the church.

As desperate as she was to speak to her brother, she could not let his efforts be for naught. She must remain hidden and she must remain alone.

A silent tear streamed down Ireena's cheek, as she held the letter up to the candle.

Vallaki

featured: prototype_ten

"Everyone had donned his or her best clothes; some of them even wore shoes."

All is
NOTwell

Interviews with a Vampire Hunter

Story by The Wereraven Bard
Art by Lazifyre
Character(s): Victor, Danika, Fiona, Rictavio, Vasili

☽☽☽

Interview 5: ~~Baron Vargas Vallakovich~~ Victor Vallakovich

"So…if I have this right, you think Vasili is just a 'bloody git?'" I asked.

"That's right. He's *too nice*. That makes him a prick."

I stood in the foyer of the burgomaster's mansion with my notepad out, talking to Victor Vallakovich, the baron's son. I had originally tried obtaining an audience with the baron himself, but his maid informed me he was too busy.

"So, you don't think Vasili is an upstanding citizen in the community?"

"I don't bloody know," said Victor scratching his greasy dark hair. "I don't see that it matters. Aren't you looking for a performer for your circus? I can tell you he doesn't know a thing about magic. Me on the other hand, I have a few tricks that would knock your socks off old man."

I looked back at my notes to see if anyone else had mentioned Vasili being a spellcaster. No one had but I was still suspicious.

It all started with the coffin maker. Henrik von der Voort. I knew as soon as I met the man

that he was hiding something. I had only just come to the town of Vallaki in the guise of a traveling bard named Rictavio. No one must know that I am actually Rudolph van Richten, famed monster hunter, nor that I am on the hunt for one of the most infamous vampires of all.

As I spoke with Henrik on the front steps of his shop, making light conversation about the dismal weather, I saw his shifting eyes, saw the perspiration on his brow and the fidgeting of his fingers.

“I noticed Vasili von Holtz came by your shop,” I had said jovially. Then I leaned in. “I hope nobody in his family has died.”

“What? Er, no. Absolutely not! Everything’s fine, just fine!” But his eyes had been as wild as a frightened deer’s and his tone angry.

Something was up, and I intended to find out what.

Now here I was, going throughout the town to gather what I could on Vasili, all the while pretending to seek out people for my carnival acts.

“I bet your little circus couldn’t handle my talent,” Victor went on. “But if you want a freak show, you should get Izek.”

“Izek Strazni? Isn’t he the town sheriff?”

“My father’s henchman you mean. Soulless bastard’s a certified monster. Father only puts up with him because he’s secretly afraid of him. Do you know how many people Izek has locked in the stocks for not showing at those stupid festivals? I’ve lost count! And I can’t tell you how many times he’s berated me for not attending.”

“Has Izek arrested you?”

“He can’t lay a hand on me.” Victor smirked. “I’ve got powerful magic. ’Sides, Mum would throw a fit if he tried.”

“Does Vasili go to these festivals?”

“Forget about him. He doesn’t do anything around here except sit on his arse at the Inn.”

Victor insisted on telling me more stories about Izek. I wasn’t sure how much of it I believed, especially the part about his ‘demon arm,’ and I could not get the conversation back to Vasili. My best bet was to move on. If Victor said that Vasili spent a lot of time at the Inn, there was only one place to go.

Interview 6: The Martikovs (Danika Dorakova)

“What do you make of Vasili von Holtz?” I asked the matron of the Blue Water Inn. I took another sip of the ale she had given me, then sat it down on the bar and looked over my notes.

“I don’t know if he’d make a good showman,” she said. “He’s quiet. Nice. Mostly keeps to himself. But he’s a loyal customer. He’s one of the few nobles that comes here and helps keep this place going.”

I liked Danika Dorakova. She was frank and had a sensible air about her. She and her husband,

Urwin Martikov, were some of the few people I felt I could trust. And so, I weighed her words with care.

“Do you know if he is a spellcaster?” I asked.

“Oh no,” Danika laughed. “I don’t even think he knows how to swing a sword. No. He’s merely a romantic. In fact, he went on a date just the other night with a red-haired girl from out of town. She and a group of newcomers came in all the way from the village of Barovia.” Danika pointed to a table in the corner. “He was sitting right over there telling the lucky girl about his romance novels.”

“He’s a novelist?”

“Oh yes. I’ve never read them though. Those types of stories aren’t my cup of tea. But other people like them well enough.”

“Do you know anyone who has read them?”

Danika put a finger to her chin in thought. “I know Father Lucian likes them.”

I flipped my notes to a conversation I had had with the priest. “He never mentioned Vasili’s novels,” I said aloud.

“Probably too embarrassed. I’ve heard those stories are scandalous. But I know the Father’s been trying for years to get Vasili to go to church.”

A cold dread filled me when I thought of Father Lucian’s interview. “The priest said he hadn’t so much as seen Vasili set foot on the church’s grounds. He told me he’s worried about his soul.”

“At least he thinks Vasili has a soul. Can’t say the same for others around here. But Father Lucian is earnest and caring. Not like that hypocrite in Krezek. I’ve heard that clergyman sequesters himself in his abbey. Doesn’t give a damn about helping the townsfolk.” Danika straightened up. “I digress. Anyway, I know a very colorful person who would be a great fit for your carnival. He even wears a jester’s motley and recently got a pet monkey. You can find him

at Blinsky Toys."

I smiled and nodded knowingly. "Yes, I've met with him. Although he seemed more interested in selling me something—as long as it wasn't a custom doll. He went on and on about how Izek Strazni had him working day and night on custom orders. There seem to be a lot of people who have negative opinions about Izek."

"Oh, yes, Izek's a real brute. If there's anyone I'd steer clear of, it's him." Danika refilled my mug and leaned in close. "A little bird told me Lady Wachter wants him dead. They say she's eyeing the baronial title. To take that position Izek would be the first thing to go."

"That sounds extreme. Do you think she could do it?"

"Possibly, with the right help. Though I can't say I like her any more than the man in charge now. She's more intelligent than Vargas—more cunning too. And that doesn't bode well for the common folk since she thinks everyone's beneath her. She's never set foot in the Inn—too unrefined for her—except once when Vasili was here signing books."

My ears pricked up. "Lady Wachter reads Vasili's books?"

"Yes, she's a big fan. Even has her own book club."

Interview 7: Lady Fiona Wachter

Lady Fiona Wachter sat across from me on a plush red couch in the parlor of her house, watching me with a sneer. She was a domineering figure, fitted in a dark elegant dress, and I could tell she didn't like me. To her I was a lowly circus performer. But at least she indulged me, which is more than I can say for the Burgomaster.

"I read Mister von Holtz's books to my husband," she said when I questioned her. "Though he hasn't told me if he likes them."

I had never met Lady Wachter's husband, but from the way she talked about him it seemed like he never said much.

"Could I take a look at one?" I asked. "A book, I mean—if it's not too much trouble."

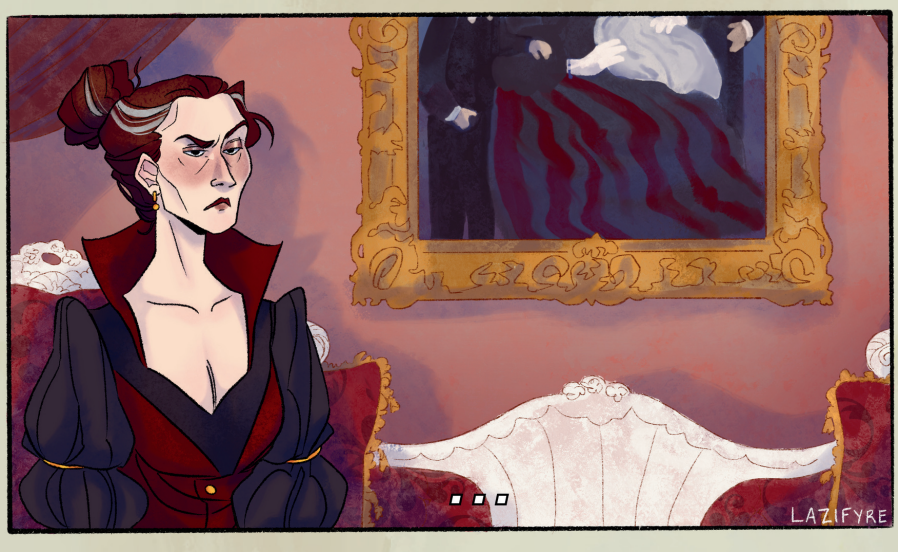
Lady Wachter picked up a pile of books from the side table beside her couch and handed them to me. My eyes narrowed and my suspicions grew as I read the titles. They were, High Stakes: Romance at Midnight, Gone by Dawn, and The Mist of Love.

Lady Wachter cleared her throat. "Right now, he's working on a sequel to my favorite series: Love Bites." I could feel her sharp eyes on me as I flipped through each novel. "You could buy one from Vasili if you're interested."

"How long have you known Vasili?" I said, not taking my eyes from the books.

"A long time. The von Holtz family goes all the way back to the conquest of Strahd von Zarovich."

My heartbeat quickened at the mention of that name. I closed the last book in my hand and looked up at her. "Did Vasili's family have ties to the Count?"



“It did in fact. Though my family is very old as well and we’ve been in Vallaki since its founding.”

“Same as Vasili’s?”

She nodded. “But Vasili is never in Vallaki for long. He prefers his manor out in the country.”

“Many people say he has a manor in the country, yet no one seems to have been there, nor do they know exactly where it is.”

“He likes to keep to himself,” she said, taking her books back. She wiped their covers with a handkerchief as if I had dirtied them. “But Vasili is very nice. You should ask him if you’re so curious. He’s exceptionally affable, as a gentleman should be.”

“You speak very highly of him.”

She raised an eyebrow. “There are few people I do.”

I flipped through my notes to a conversation I had had at the toyshop. “When I interviewed Gadolf Blinksy,” I said, “a little girl named Arabelle chimed in when we spoke of Vasili. She said, and I quote, ‘Grown-ups say he’s nice, but he always gave me the creeps.’ She went on to tell me that some of her friends felt the same.”

Lady Wachter let out a laugh. “She’s a child. What do children know? I would not worry about that, Mr. Rictavio. If you want to invite Vasili to read his novels as an act in your show, I’m sure the town would enjoy it.”

I left Lady Wachter’s house going through each interview in my notes as I walked back to my wagon. A low rumble came from the dark clouds above and I shivered from the chill in the wind. My fingers traced the words in my pad, and I saw a pattern. Each interviewer remarked that Vasili was “nice.” If so, what was that glint of pure terror in Henrik’s face when I mentioned Vasili by name? I am good in my line of work and have a trained eye. I knew his face reflected the kind of panic only living nightmares can give. I tried talking with Henrik afterwards, but he was tight-lipped as a clam.

I thought of Vasili’s reclusive nature, his romanticized vampire novels, and the mysterious manor in the country. I thought of his lack of church attendance and his long lineage that happened to coincide with the Count’s. The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced

that Vasili could in fact be—

“Hello Mr. Rictavio.”

I stopped in my tracks, looking up at the man standing in front of me, and my breath caught in my throat.

“I hear you’re looking for great talent,” he said. “I’d love to be a part of your act!”

Interview 8: Unexpected Interview with Vasili

My heart pounded and I reached for the wooden stake in my vest.

“You’re the new bard in town, right?” The man asked with a bounce in his words.

“Yes,” I said, my hand hidden inside my vest, gripping the makeshift weapon.

“Well, I’ll be!” He beamed. He had a warm smile and friendly eyes. “We’ve never been properly introduced. I’m Vasili von Holtz.” He held out his hand.

I slowly let go of the stake and shook his hand with a timid grip.

“A pleasure.” I lied. I had no hard evidence against him. If only I had my mirror or my vial of holy water. “Um, have you done any kind of performing before?” I asked, putting on my own act as best I could.

“I’ve never been on stage, but my butler says I’d make a phenomenal thespian. Acting is somewhat of a hobby of mine.”

He certainly had the look of one, I thought. With his thick dark hair, combed to perfection and his styled suit and cloak, he looked every inch a handsome actor.

“When are you planning on having your show?” Vasili asked.

“During the next town festival.”

He clicked his tongue in disappointment. “I’m sorry, but I’ve got a date that day and I intend to devote every minute to her.”

I had forgotten that Danika told me he was seeing someone. “Oh, well, maybe next time you’d be interested. Um, do you have an address I could reach you at? I could come by.”

“I have an apartment on the east side of town, but I’m going back to my manor after the festival.”
“That’s right,” I said, pretending not to have remembered. “Where is your manor?”

“Out in the country.”

I was about to question him further, but a sudden peace came upon me, and he began talking about his late family and how he sometimes got lonely in his big, country house. And the more he talked the more I wanted to listen and not interrupt. His voice was like music. It was mesmerizing, like watching flames crackle in a campfire or hearing water babble over rocks in a tranquil stream. All the while he would slip in a mention of the girl he was dating, a red-haired maiden. I tried to search his face for hidden meaning behind this suave persona, but there was nothing, except for a slight twitch in his smile that verged on hungry excitement.

“I’m going to take her there,” he said to me. “After our date at the festival, I’ll take her to Crowgarret Manor. I can’t wait to show her. She’s going to love it! But what’s this?” He pointed to the notepad in my hand.

I don’t know why but I gave it to him.

“I hope you find someone for your act soon,” he said, passing his hand over my notes. His fingers seemed to move in an arcane gesture. “The festival is less than a tenday away. Well, I should be going. Good luck hunting!” He gave me back the notepad.

I waved farewell and when I looked down, my notepad was blank. Had it always been blank? Try as I might, I could not remember. I looked around me. What was I doing again? Talking with Vasili. That’s right. And what a nice gentleman he was.

☽

The Grief of Growing

Art & Story by Niicococo and Eliot Baum

Character(s): Fiona Wachter, Lydia Petrovna

☽☽☽

I.

Rain.

The sky broke above us in a soundless moment, into a torrent soaking the crowd beneath in a few breaths. His last breaths.

The ball of deadwood and branches constructed carefully, tediously sat there with no purpose anymore, no fire to set it ablaze against this rain. An end to a festival no one could've foreseen.

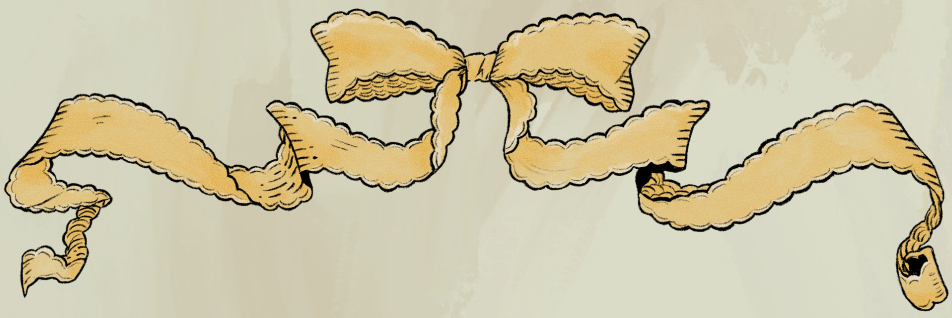
Like white noise, it drowned out the presence of the people around. Washing away the voices, the faces, the threats around me. I watched the blood soften with it, crawl into the wood beneath me. Etching line after line into its veins, from my clutching hands, from his chest. The red pooled around me like a crimson veil, warmer still when it flowed, freshly from a wound that choked the life out of my husband. *My life.*

I cried for help, loud and anguished; to the blurred faces in the crowd, the guards that had kept us safe for so long, the black hem of a familiar dress. My voice died in my throat when I looked up.

My old friend stood, straight-spined almost like an iron, smoke-blackened pillar driven into this wooden platform. Unmoving against the grey, cascading backdrop and my piercing cry.

My eyes widened in despair when they met hers. Looking down upon me. Cold and uncaring like the world here was.

II.



Wachter.

It was a name I had heard, had written into notebooks to be filled with our governess's spoken wisdom. Wachter; bloodbound to Ravenloft.

I heard it again then, like little chirps spreading into a building chorus inside this wood-dressed room. I had to smile when I realized even the room was dressed for the occasion.

From my little corner, a bit to the side and closer to the wall, I could observe them well. The chair I found there was a welcome respite, folding my awkward height in half.

It was odd to be in a room full of strangers. My parents gathered with the other grown-ups in the next salon, and I had no sisters young enough to join me here. All noble girls in town were invited to join a dance this day.

"An unofficial get-together for the young ladies of Vallaki," my parents told me. A gathering to build bonds. Having only seen them from afar, I did not know any of the girls in town personally. All my friends shared the same roof with me as my dear brothers and sisters.

It was very odd indeed.

This place was different from what I was used to from home, from this land. It was a bright place, filled with laughter and a small, cheerful crowd of little ladies. Their skirts rustled with each step, like leaves the little birds chattered amidst.

My dress was quiet. I was too. My eyes darted attentively, taking in the colors and the chatter of joy. Excitement bubbled in the room as it did within me. It had all morning since my sister had braided my long, brown hair into a halo, she called it, sitting atop my head.

Suddenly, a wave of noise gathered at the entrance and I watched everyone gather with it. I couldn't see much through the billowing dresses and I almost rose from my chair. A new voice joined the chorus and that is when I saw her.

Something yellow and bright sat nestled in her raven-black hair, looking so light as it bounced with each of her confident steps. It looked so gentle on her. So beautiful.

I stumbled back to my wall when she passed, overwhelmed by all the girls surrounding her like a flock. She almost disappeared between them, but her dark hair stood out just like the warm yellow of her ribbon.

I didn't realize my eyes had started seeking that bright ribbon, that put-together dress of hers; watching the lovely arch of her nose when she spoke to another girl. Such long lashes. Her eyes were almost black too, I realized when she met my attentive gaze all of a sudden.

Before I knew it, she had crossed the large span of the room between us with poise, addressing me from above. My shoulders drew up, reflexively, as I peeked at her from below my halo.

"Would you like to join us, Lady..." Fiona Wachter, standing in front of me, paused before the end and my body felt as taut as a thread when she invited me in. Into this dance, into this conversation.

"Lydia." Mother and Father would always introduce me as Lady Lydia, and themselves as Lady Petrovna and Lord Petrovich.

"Lydia..." she repeated and I nearly sighed in relief that she had heard the muttered beginning of my name.

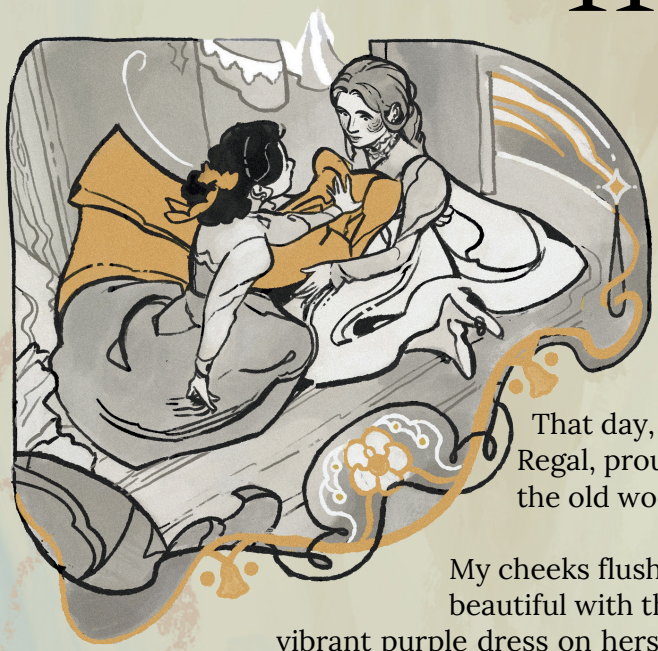
she repeated and I nearly sighed in relief, that had she heard the muttered beginning of my name after all.

No one could deny Fiona Wachter's presence was as grand as a princess's in this room. Yet in this moment, to our curious audience we must've looked like a mouse gazing up to a broomstick.

"Let us dance then, Lady Lydia," she said, taking my hand and inviting me into hers and the others' shared joy.

I was so happy to have made a friend.

III.



"Hm? What about my ribbon, again?"

Fiona smiled the teasing, kind smile of hers that made my heart beat quicker.

Today was heavy with grey clouds, brightened only by the giggling and laughter erupting from an old, dignified mansion in the noble district.

That day, I was Fiona's guest again in the Wachterhaus. Regal, proud and imposing Wachterhaus. Every line in the old wooden floors creaked with legacy.

My cheeks flushed before I could say anything. "It looks very beautiful with this dress." She twirled around, holding a vibrant purple dress on herself. It was one of the many she had presented today, but by far the most beautiful on her. I was sitting on the floor, looking up at her in the soft, bunched fabric of my own flowy dress. Today, here, it looked so pale and colorless next to hers.

Modest, my parents always praised.

It made me notice, perhaps for the first time, how different our wardrobes were. How different she was to me. How prettily her hair fell down in locks, while mine looked best tucked into braids. How her dresses flattered her body, which had started to grow into that of a fine lady. Her face had remained soft and petite, while I felt mine growing longer with every day.

In a twirl, she moved to the closet, exchanging one colorful dress for another, this one in a golden yellow. Fiona joined me on the floor and promptly held the dress to my chest, sending the heart beneath it aflutter.

"It suits you." Her voice was quieter now, closer, sharing this clandestine thought meant only for me.

I found my breath again. "I'm uncertain my parents would pick this color for me."

Her fingers spread on my chest to hold the dress in place. "But it's as bright as the sun at dawn, see?" Now Fiona held up a sleeve, making me chuckle.

"I suppose." I reached up cautiously to hold the dress against me. Her black curls cascaded onto her shoulder as she tilted her head in consideration.

Slowly, more curls came tumbling as she wordlessly started undoing her hair, the waves framing her white neck like a lake at night. Framing the moon.
I remained very still, like a deer before a wolf, as she reached around and undid my hair as well.

Her sleeve brushed my cheek, fingers combing through and fastening my hair much looser than before. I pressed my eyes shut to an almost painful degree. When I couldn't feel her presence anymore I squinted, carefully, and was welcomed with a satisfied expression. She wasn't wearing her ribbon and I felt something silken tickle my neck.

"Your ribbon!" I reached back and she chuckled.

"My dress may not fit you, but this ribbon does." Her hair lay open, and I felt my gaze dropping. I stumbled over my next words. "Is this not too bold for me...?"

"How else will the boys notice you?" It took mere moments for my face to grow hotter and redder, eliciting a mirthful laugh from Fiona. Yet the sound was so kind, I couldn't help but join in soon after. The boys.

I wondered if I would catch anyone's eye.

IV.

She was glowing like the last warm rays in the Morning Lord's dusk.

"Fiona, your dress!" Her step was as steady and confident as it had always been when she walked towards me. But her cheeks flushed with excitement today. "You've never looked more beautiful."

Our new debutante dresses had arrived in time, mine in a tone like gold, embroidered with blooming flowers and butterflies. Fiona's was darker, a rich purple that made her appear so mature, even more regal — a woman.

"Oh, look at you." Fiona took one sweeping look at me, from head to toe, that made my back straighten with a shudder. "You look lovely. Like a true Lady." She offered her arm and I hunched a bit to meet her gesture.

Today, for the first time we saw them more than in passing, gathered in one place: The noblemen of Vallaki. Their clothes were darker, though some colors were bolder with tailcoats spreading from their back like the wings of young ravens.

Coy glances, careful smiles, hushed whispers across this grand room. It had an open balcony atop stairs to cast an eye on one another, offering more prudence. Fiona took a liking to one nobleman rather quickly. She had to crane her neck to look into his gentle blue eyes and admire his wheat-golden hair.

I felt a rush of warmth when she touched his arm with the lightness of a feather. He offered it to her then, and I felt like I was part of the novels I hide under my mattress.

There was another man, bold and charming in golds and reds: the mayor's son, Vargas Vallakovich.

Mayor Vallakovich was a scary man but Vargas was not. He made me laugh with his exciting retelling of old tales. I forgot to watch for the tall gentleman leading Fiona towards the dance floor.

I hadn't had this much fun in one day for a while. Vargas's joy and verve were impossible not to

adore, and I sought forgiveness for my blasphemous thought; but would this radiance be how the Morning Lord's sunlight felt, outside?

9ϱ

I remember how surprised Fiona was when she noticed my interest in the mayor's son.

My ankles were aching after Vargas's final spin, one of many he had shown me — a thrilling, wild dance I was hardly accustomed to. With exhilaration lingering in my step still, I returned to Fiona amidst other girls resting, only to be met with scrutiny.

"I would not have expected you to take a fancy to someone so bold and...loud."

It was no surprise for me — I have always held great admiration for others more outspoken than me, more confident and radiant. Qualities to aspire for, but for me they were worthy of worship. I always wondered how people like her, people like him, people who are larger than life, regard each other.

I wondered, then, if the nobleman she had laid eyes on was of a similar quality.

I had noticed a certain spark in my dear Fiona's eyes when she observed him across the room. She had never looked at another boy like this. There was a coquettish shyness to her, a flutter in her gaze and in her movements when their eyes met.

I often wondered how it must feel like to catch the interest of a girl like her. To be seen by Fiona Wachter.

To think, I would behold her look at this boy with eyes I had often dreamt about, eyes I had often imagined on myself — it excited me. That look was real now, even if not towards me. Now, I could bear witness to my daydreams, my fantasies coming to life. Fiona's eyes softened with coy affection and attraction. Lips, curling into a longing for mine — *his*. Her pale complexion reddening at the cheeks.

The Morning Lord kisses skin with hues of gold, I've heard, and I had always wondered who'd kiss hers one day.

V.

They were a dashing pair — so blissfully enamored they inspired even the regular Barovian passerby to risk a glance upward. Ridden by dullness, their ingrained tendencies kept their eyes otherwise stuck on the cobblestone trudged upon, only to now let the eye follow in admiration.

A match made in the heavens far above the mists. Only those who knew Fiona Wachter closely bore witness to the laugh from deep within her chest, or the spark in her eye when she wanted something.

But I've never known her like this. A Fiona foreign to me, meant only for one person: the person she desired.

It wasn't jealousy that welled within me when I watched them. In the surge of merriment Fiona and Nikolai felt, I couldn't help but be moved within this tide as well. It wasn't mine; it never would be. But this love caught hold of my Fiona, filling her with hopes and dreams and promises. I was content being a spectator.

୨୧

When he proposed, it took me by surprise.

Vargas had a flush on his face and wore this smile that bloomed warmth within me. It quivered when time without words passed, as I myself was too flabbergasted to respond. Did he truly mean me? Me, who had been waiting for her own love to rise like the sun, and who felt it in all the kindnesses and sweet words from Vargas. Many times had I wondered, could one person truly love two at the same time?

"What do you say, Lady Lydia Petrovna?"

Hastily yet far too belatedly, I mutely nodded; no word could capture my excitement.

I was sure he was about to kiss me. Without meaning to, I stood on tiptoes, growing longer still, thwarting his attempt by accident. And by accident, he almost bumped into me. He steadied himself quickly; only to grasp my hands into his own strong and warm ones as he laughed the loud, buoyant laugh of his that I cherished so. He was embarrassed, and so was I, but in the way two people share a secret. With rosy cheeks and full of warmth and intimacy.

The Burgomaster's son's wife...!

Fiona's face, when I told her, was a puzzle in on itself. Gone were the traces of love written finely around the lines of her sweet mouth.

"Are you quite sure?" We looked at each other for what felt like a moment spared from time. Her long lashes hooded those eyes that always saw right through me. Perhaps not always, and not never, but I seldom wondered how, if she could see truly all of me, our lives would be now.
"He's very kind, Fiona." I squeezed her hand laid in mine. And quieter, I added, "He loves me."

I felt my hand squeezed back and something in her face shifted. Her eyebrows were drawn, but her smile returned. It was not her usual one; neither the one for me nor for her Nikolai.

VI.

We sat together in the nursery. She was holding her sweet baby boy in her arms, cradling him, humming a song. He had golden hair, just like his father. The down on his small head was so light and delicate, it was almost see-through. He held onto her finger as she looked upon him with the pride and devotion one must feel, looking at such a little miracle born into the world; the pride and devotion of a mother holding her first born.

When I arrived shortly after hearing the news of her safe delivery, I found her still in the childbed. She glowed like a saint, and for a moment I swore the Morning Lord sent a ray of sunshine through the window to bless the little creature she so lovingly held in her arms.

I leaned in to see more of him. His perfect nose, his long lashes on his yet closed eyes — a beautiful, healthy boy. She cooed to still the uneased whimpers of a life not yet accustomed to the grey of this world. Not like he had much to worry over, he would soon learn. The Wachters' love for him had taken hold many months ago. He yawned, and the smile on Fiona grew. She looked up to me, and her expression was met in kind. I felt so warm and joyful this day.

When I held onto his foot with my fingertips, counting every single toe on it, I couldn't but wonder if mine would have had such incredibly small feet. If it would have grown to have five little toes on each foot like this one, five small fingers on each tiny hand. If it would have had my nose or his chin, and if it would have held onto me just as trustfully, searching for my protection.

Something twisted and churned. I blinked what I hoped Fiona would understand were tears of joy for her. They must have been.

Carefully, I reached to caress the small dress he was draped in. She laughed, this velvet tone from the soul, all contentment and delight. It soothed him and, in a way, me as well. Her eyes trailed from his to mine then, and I felt compelled to sit down next to her. I could feel her shoulder touching mine.

"I am sure you'll soon be blessed again, Lydia."

VII.

"Does this not sound... absurd to you?" She hardly ever raised her voice like that with me. Even if I knew now how to calm unexpected upset.

"Vargas said the town will do so much better with the mandatory festivals." I smiled.

I wasn't sure. Vargas spoke so proudly of these rules and I supported his decision in the best way I could. The only way someone as frail as me could.

My smile grew. Even when Fiona's eyebrows, first furrowed in a frown, were raised in confusion. "But what do you think?"

Did my opinion really matter? Would anything really hold sway?

When irritation rose out of a quiet tension, it didn't erupt. When his voice was void of his verve, it was replaced with a growing anger that never quite spilled but boiled.

It took me time, far too long for my beloved Vargas, to find the aid to his illness. Meager as it was, my smiles and my eked out joy stilled the bubbling tide.

"I think..."

It did not still Fiona's. But this was exactly what this gloomy town needed, wasn't it? Festivals of laughter that left no room for those unhappy. Maliciously unhappy. He'd told me many, many times what would bring sunshine to this town. Words of grandeur and vision.

"...some cheer is just what Vallaki needs."

They became my words too.

VIII.

It was on a misty day the Morning Lord took Nikolai to Him. He fought long against adamant illness until he eventually succumbed to it, after many harrowing weeks. Fiona fought this illness with him, tooth and nail and on a rare prayer. All for naught.

Vargas had forbidden me to visit Fiona at that time.

"That man is dying. Don't you think spending time over there will afflict your mood? Having her around you as she grieves and such won't do you any good, either."

He was right, much as it saddened me. As Nikolai got sicker and weaker, I saw Fiona less and less. I did not miss a single day of writing her consoling letters, telling her of my prayers for her dear husband. But her tears of sorrow and despair was too much for my afflicted heart.

Yet, I could not leave her alone. Not now that I knew.

Fiona was a ghost in black when I saw her. After his departure, she locked both her heart and presence away from the world around her. She clad herself in colors that swallowed all light. I barely recognized my dear friend behind the dark lace.

She mourned deeply for him, and I held her hand. I barely remember the words she shared with me about his last days, about her growing worry now. I only noticed the strength of her grip — how fierce, and yet fragile, it was.

I wanted nothing more than to console her. To make her happy again, to see her beautiful, confident smile again. To forget about the pain, and to hope again. Just like I did.

"All will be *well*...?" she repeated after me in a mutter.

"Yes, my dear." The corners of my mouth twitched upward. "All Will Be Well."

Her grip suddenly lost strength, then and there. Her hand pulled away, and so did she. I smiled at her, patiently, but I couldn't discern this feeling that slowly started to spread within me. A certain dread, like the creeping cold of winter numbing my insides, painfully so.

There she was, sitting next to me still. But after those words were spoken, it was as if I was no more than a stranger to her, as unfamiliar as a townsperson crossing her path by chance.

A large rift no more words could bridge, dark and ghastly as it was.

Deep as a ravine.

I'd never lost that feeling, dwelling deep inside — one that no laughter, no festival, and no demanded cheer could cover.

IX.

It had been long since Fiona's last visit. I was excited to have guests over, excited to talk about the engagement of our offspring, about the happenings during the last Festival. Fiona had missed it, and I saw it as my responsibility to catch her up on all the delightful details.

Her black gown and veil may not have fit today's joyous occasion, but I couldn't help but compliment her on her choice of fine accessories. "You look wonderful, my dear."

Over dinner, I found Fiona and Vargas talking together often. They even talked over each other sometimes, which surprised me. Their conversations had always been short and kept on a tight rein.

"Only a blind man would be oblivious to the preposterous nature of these rules."

Fiona's voice finally predominated over Vargas.

I did not notice the tension in the room until it was dead quiet. Vargas spent the last minutes eloquently presenting his visionary laws for the city. Words I have heard so many times in the past days, they started to coalesce. They became a melody I, by now, knew by heart. I started to giggle, assuming the last words spoken must have been a joke, or something of that sort.

"Preposterous? My rules?"

The sound of Vargas' voice made my stomach sink. I knew this tone... when he sang his words, but his clenched jaw would not let them sound as cheerful as they should.

I flinched, not as if awaiting a blow but hearing the stirrings of a familiar storm. In moments most dark, I thanked the Morning Lord he found the balm to it, hidden away in a part of our home unbeknownst to me.

The wails of the strangers he brought inside kept me up at night: punishment for my weakness. "Vargas. A word of warning from the house Wachter. People will not stand by this. People will grow restless." Her blackened veil obscured the glare directed at my husband with an intensity that made my blood run cold. He didn't seem to notice it, and I thanked the Lord for it.

Only I could hear his belated response as Fiona stood up in one smooth motion and left.

"Restless? They're happy! But how would you know if you've never been to a single Festival!"

I took a hearty swig, my glass of wine — the fourth? third? — empty again. He spoke to me, I was dimly aware of that. The gentle lull of wine dulled his words, blunting their sharpness, softening my vision, and loosening my grip around the glass' stem.

When she left, all I saw was the back of her head, with a beautiful hairpin gracefully holding her black locks and veil together. Unbidden, memories of the girl with the golden ribbon in her hair came to me as if in a dream. The brightness of that day, the happiness I felt — it shone for a fleeting moment. How everything changed, I thought. How we've changed.

The glass in my hand didn't shatter, not wholly so, but too many parts of it broke well beyond repair.

X.

The rain drowned noise, swallowed murmurs, and kept command of sound.

For a brief moment, she met my eyes, now with me on my knees. Her veil was drawn up enough to let me see her cold glare. With a gaze, that finally made me realize just how far we grew apart.

All those years ago I had risen from my chair, hastily, to meet her gaze. Then, she wore an almost imperceptible, yet kind smile. She had to look up to me, but her presence was felt as much as mine, even more so.

Now, her blackened silhouette loomed much larger, so large, no matter where I stood or sat, I would never be at eye level again.

I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, but instead it came out like choked sobs, quieter with my throat hoarse. My body always too weak, failing when it was needed.

Vargas was cold and quiet before me.

Everything was taken from me, thread by thread ripped apart and torn asunder, in just a heartbeat, from what was once my everything.

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FINISHED
4/20/2025

Ink Stain

Story by Littlewrenbirds

Character(s): Stella, Victor

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The stories that filled Stella's childhood shelves always ended in absolutes. True love, man-and-wife, pressed kisses, and ivory dresses held together with fairytale seams while the words happily ever after danced across the page. Well into the night, with naught but a candle beside her to light the way, she'd once read those books to the point of recital, let them follow her into her dreams. One day it would be her rescued from a life of stiff routine and recital, free to live life as she pleased.

The future waited like a promise until it finally arrived, and Stella, who'd grown enough to know fantasy was ever out of reach but not enough to lose hope, found the future to be a liar. Her Prince Charming? The young heir to the Vallakovich name. A socially averse noble boy who'd only turned eighteen following her, their marriage arranged by the adults who claimed to know best. *Unite our families. Play your role.* The only one permitted for a girl of her standing and age.

Now, she stood in her wedding dress feeling like a child playing dress-up. The bouquet of flowers, which had bloomed so prettily before being cut at the stem, had paled. Victor Vallakovich could barely look at her as he stood at her side. Her mother's overbearing gaze bore down from the first row of the pews, her brothers looking on half in pity, half in relief that they weren't in her shoes. Father Lucien held his breath after reciting the Morninglord's blessing, like he was only words away from laying down an irreversible sentence.

All they had to do was this. Seal the marriage first by action, then, in ink. Victor was taller than her, but his suit still seemed too big for him, like the tailor couldn't figure out how to fit his wiry limbs into it in a flattering manner. Stella looked up at him. Waited too. He was the one who had to initiate; his main role in this awkward performance they'd found themselves in.

It was swift. His lips were dry when he finally pressed them against hers, and it struck her then that she didn't quite know how to kiss him back. She'd read, of course, of passion and love and how this first union was meant to be all of that and more. Instead, it felt unremarkable and cold, like the spark between them had failed to ignite.

Before she could search for any hint of warmth, he pulled back. Looked away. Clenched his fists amidst the ovation of their audience.

"Victor," Stella whispered. His name didn't linger on her tongue in yearning desire. This was reality, not her old novels. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Stiff and concise. His hands were fists at his sides instead of holding hers. They

strayed from her in the festivities after, too, a hefty distance between them no matter how close together they stood. Stella fashioned her face into something serene and smiled, made frivolous conversation with other nobility, but Victor kept to himself all the while.

She feared, not for the first time since they'd met, that she didn't even know how to be his friend, much less his wife. How could she be a confidant to a man who wouldn't even speak to her? How could she love someone who seemed frozen and rigid both inside and out?

As the day came to its end, Father Lucien guided them to a desk. A pot of ink sat at the edge, a piece of paper requesting their signatures. Never had something so innocuous felt so damning, but he looked on expectantly, and Stella had no other cue left to follow but this.

Keeping her calm facade in place, she took up the quill and signed her name daintily on the line officiating the rest of her life.

But when Victor reached for the quill himself, Stella noticed something. His hands, which had been so far from her all evening, trembled like soil atop shaking earth. When he took the quill, he knocked into the pot too. The thing spilled in an instant, scoring deep black lines across the certificate; spattering Stella's white dress too.

For an instant, alarm crossed his face before he quelled it, his expression creasing with irritation. "For god's sake—"

"It's fine." She laid her hand over his, felt the cold of his skin before he retracted it from her hold. "It's just paper. Just fabric. I'll never wear it again anyway."

He clicked his tongue. Turned away with a mutter. But she didn't miss how those creases in his face softened, how the faintest hint of relief took his place. Maybe there was a way to make this work. She just had to find it.

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The stories never spoke of what came *after*, once the wedding bells had gone silent and the bride-and-groom were pronounced man-and-wife. For the heroes of Stella's childhood, marriage was the endpoint. The final stop before they ascended into memory and legacy to be reread all over again.

For her, she wondered if marriage was also some kind of end. Life became something awkward and lonely to navigate. The new house was a gift from the Burgomaster for his son and new daughter-in-law, but the walls felt cold and unfamiliar, the laughter of her brothers no longer around every corner. She found herself navigating the unknown, and despite the ring on her finger, she did it quite alone.

Her new husband wasn't one for conversation. No, he was one for books, which she at first thought was the perfect common ground. If they couldn't talk yet, then perhaps they could find each other through the worlds of their novels. So, one evening, as he attempted to hide away in the study as always, she attempted to follow with fairytale in hand.

He stopped her at the door, turning with a frustrated look. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I thought we might read together," Stella replied, holding up her book. "See? I've been wanting to get to know you better. Maybe…maybe we could start here?"

He took one look at the cover and scoffed. "Really? I should have known you'd have such banal tastes. No. If you want to do anything for me, you can leave me alone."

She narrowed her eyes. “So what are your tastes then?”

“Nothing a girl like you would be interested in.”

It felt like a physical blow. It reminded her of her mother denying her the activities her brothers were allowed to indulge in on the account that it was unladylike, as if a child thought about the confines of adulthood. Marriage was supposed to have been freedom. Out of the watchful eye of her strict parent and into the life of the man who would love her.

But perhaps Victor was right about one thing; if fairytales were rooted in banality and childish dreams, then it was time to expand her taste. She dropped her book on his desk and moved to stand behind him, faster than he could slam his own book shut. In the brief seconds before he managed it, she caught sight of what lay before him.

A leather-bound tome, not fiction at all. Runes were inscribed into the thick pages, fine writing dashed across the centre. Intrigue danced in her eyes. “What was that?”

“I told you—”

“Don’t judge me before you’ve even said anything about it. Please, I want to know.”

His fine features twisted in frustration. If only he would smile; she thought privately that he might still look the part of the man in her dreams. She thought he’d turn her away. Snap at her to get out. But surprisingly, he relented. Shoved the book at her.

“Magic,” he said stiffly. “Something I doubt you’d ever understand.”

Magic. Suddenly, their tastes didn’t seem so different after all, but Stella would never dare point that out. Not when something had shifted, not when he’d opened up, spiteful as it had been.

She took the book in her hands, gently leafed through the pages with hands that had never wielded more than kitchen utensils and quill pens. Magic could battle the horrors beyond their town walls. It could destroy and create, even heal and harm.

Victor wanted power? For the first time, she thought she understood him wholly. She, too, wanted the same strength to shift tectonic plates, to finally change her own circumstances.

“There’s a lot of components,” she murmured. Some required things she’d never heard of, it wasn’t so simple as uttering a few words. “But this looks…fun. Interesting.”

You think you understand?” Victor asked, but it sounded less like a question and more like judgement.

“Not in the slightest. But I’ve always been a good student.” She passed the book back to him. “I enjoy making things work, see?”

As she passed it back, he nearly knocked a pot of ink right over in his haste to retrieve it. She caught it before it could tumble, the pot cool in her grasp. He glanced at her. She smiled.

And something in his expression relaxed, just a little.

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Days passed. The atmosphere in the new house shifted, lighter, easier to bear. A little black cat appeared in the front room one day, and Stella lavished her love on it while Victor watched from afar.

“Did you bring this here?” she asked.

“My father summoned me home,” Victor said. “She followed me back. I don’t mind, they don’t insist on bothering me like certain people do.”

Stella had begun to learn that Victor’s bark was far worse than his bite, and that perhaps marriage was to be a marathon rather than a sprint. “I understand. I had cats at home, too. My favourite was a little darling named Princess, she was just so sweet and perfect…but not long for this world, unfortunately. She’s buried in my family garden now. That’s the trouble, isn’t it? They don’t live nearly as long as we do.”

Victor crossed his arms. Ducked his head in an almost thoughtful manner. But he was as difficult to read as some of his complex tomes, so when he vanished off to his study, she didn’t stop him.

The next morning, out of the blue, Victor assigned her a task. It felt almost like a test. “There’s a spell I want to try, and seeing as you insisted on your interest, maybe you can help. A drop of blood, a piece of flesh, and bone dust. Get me those, and maybe I’ll get you a gift.”

She’d never realised magic required such ghastly sacrifices, but despite her reservations about such things, she also didn’t want to disappoint the man she was to love. In the kitchen, she took a knife in her right hand while looking down to her left. A small price to pay for her fairytale end, or so she told herself as her heart beat with the speed of a mouse’s. A short moment of pain for a lifetime of love.

Quick. Simple. Easy. The knife cut through skin as easily as her quill had signed her name on the marriage certificate, but the pain lingered long after. She bandaged her finger tight, and kept the drop of blood safe in a small vial Victor had given her. She’d never seen anything else so red.

The piece of flesh was easy too; nowhere did it say it had to be human, and a wander down to the market allowed her to procure some from the local butcher. All that left was bone dust, which she haggled from the woman running the apothecary. What kind of bone and what it had once been were unknown quantities, but Stella found she preferred it that way.

Victor seemed surprised when she presented him with all three ingredients, those blue eyes losing some of their frost as they widened by a fraction. He looked remarkably dashing when his guard was down, but all too swiftly, he put his defences back up.

“Maybe,” he said, and there was a strange, indiscernible element to his tone, “there’s hope for you after all.”

Stella grinned despite how her finger ached. “Hope for us, don’t you think?”

But that night, he didn’t come to bed. Stella fell asleep without him, and when she woke, his side was still cold. It wasn’t entirely unusual, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. Quietly, she took to the halls, making for the one place she knew she’d always find him.

The door to the study was closed. She raised her hand to knock, but the air felt cold, the scent

of rot catching in her nostrils. Her stomach rolled. Nausea met with dread. The blood, the flesh, the dust—what did it all equal, in the end?

She grabbed the door handle, threw the door wide. Victor, stood with his back to her at the desk, turned in a rapid rush. As he did, several things went tumbling; an empty vial, scorched flesh, remnants of dust, and the familiar ink pot.

Black spattered across the stark white bones of the creature that pawed at its face behind him. The hideous thing sat on the desk like it belonged there, like some farcical caricature of a living creature, and Stella stepped back in horror.

But Victor didn't seem so horrified. Instead, he offered a ghost of a smile, the first thing she'd ever seen on him that wasn't that ever-present scowl. "You interrupted earlier than I expected," he said. "But here is my gift. For helping me out with my experiment. Thank you."

"Experiment…?" The word felt hollow in her mouth. "I don't—don't understand."

"Surely you'd recognise your precious pet? I did this for you."

The creature stared at her with its empty sockets. Her hand met with her mouth as she thought she might be sick. "You—you—no. No. This is—"

Resurrection, but not in the way it was meant to be. No. This thing in front of her wasn't her Princess, whole and healthy and hale. This thing was an empty husk, all bones and no soul.

"This is monstrous," she gasped, fleeing the room.

Victor called out after her, but she couldn't face him, his voice. The cat's skeletal paws crashed against the wooden floors as it chased her. She should have known. Blood and flesh and dust—the sum was never to lead to anything beautiful. Just death and evil, magic that should never be touched.

As she reached the front door, desperate for fresh air, a hand caught her wrist. Victor, his face awash with panic, just the way it had been the day of the wedding, but this didn't abate the way it had then. His mouth moved in a frenzy. She heard her name, followed by a flurry of words she didn't comprehend.

Her eyes locked with the skeletal cat she'd once called her friend, and as she did, reality felt like it skewed on its side, her vision warping, the world tipping out of alignment.

When she looked down, her paws didn't seem quite the right shape. Her body felt too big for the small creature she truly was. Her balance skewed, she collapsed onto her knees with a shudder.

Victor—dear Victor—looked down at her, still wearing that alarm, still wearing that look of utter, utter fear. Princess stared at her. Stella stared back. The ink that had settled upon her bones, was that how Victor decorated his companions? She reached her own paw out to swipe some for herself, to draw blackened lines on her own skin.

"Stella?" Victor said, unease coating his voice. "What are you doing?"

With a smile, Stella looked up at him, her heart swelling with affection. "Don't be sad, Victor. Little kitty is here, and she'll be a good girl for you, see?"

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The room was dark and cold, rancid and soiled, and had been for so, so long now. Stella didn't mind, though, not when Victor might be there at any moment to pick her up.

She stretched her body, groomed her fur, and went to sit by the door. The wood had begun to splinter beneath her claws, desperation for her beloved to come and retrieve her forcing her into action. Any day. Any minute. She was ever faithful, ever loyal.

Footsteps closing in made her heart lurch in excitement, the pattern unfamiliar to other people that occupied this house, those who'd locked her in here and taken Victor away from her. It had been a lonely, lonely stretch of time without him. She was just a little kitty, and she'd not been made to be alone.

But perhaps today was the day that she'd finally be reunited with him, and together, they'd be lonely no more.

She pressed herself against the door, claws pressing into the splinters, and held her breath.

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ISABUBI

The Primal, Eldest Curse

Story by Imitateslife
Art by Notpink-ri
Character(s): Ireena, Izek

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What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow?
-- Claudius, Hamlet Act III, Scene III

When Ireena and Ismark buried their father, they stood alone in the Church of Barovia Village as Father Donavich shakily performed the rituals. Kolyan Indirovich's children were cursed and had been regarded as such even before their father's death. A year ago, Ireena's strange dreams began; a year ago, the village's young people took up arms against the vampire count, Strahd von Zarovich. It was only because of Ireena's strange dreams, which felt more like prophecy than the misfirings of a vivid imagination, that Ismark put away his sword the night that all the others perished, fighting an unbeatable foe.

She had dreamt of falling from the castle walls, earth and stone giving way below her feet and pitching her into the endless chasm below. In the dream, Ismark fought Count Strahd above and the vampire abandoned the fight to watch Ireena fall away into nothing. She saw Ismark rush over, only for the Devil to reach up with supernatural reflexes and claw into Ismark's chest so that he slumped to the ground and the Devil held Ismark's still-beating heart in his hands. She awoke on the balcony in Ismark's room and he gently pulled her off the railing, back to safety. She sobbed in his chest for hours while he stroked her hair. She confessed that she feared the Devil would devour his heart if given the chance.

"Then he will not have it," Ismark said. "I will stay home to protect it for you."

It was bad luck to have visions, especially accurate ones, in Barovia. It was worse luck that Ireena's words had not persuaded anyone but Ismark to stay home. The children they'd grown up alongside were no longer children; they were corpses.

There had been a time when the whole village's regard for Kolyan would have moved them to Ireena and Ismark's aid. That time ended when the attacks began. The Kolyanaviches had not fought and had not called off the attack. That meant the house fell under siege by Strahd's forces: punishment for their cowardice. Their punishment for attracting his attention, prolonging the Village of Barovia's suffering, was for them to have no one but each other to turn to. Ireena and Ismark were alone in the world. It was better to be alone with him than to be accompanied by a dozen familiar strangers. He had always protected her and she had always protected him. Their father needed no other mourners.

Of course, Ravenloft sent its regards. As the last prayer echoed around the empty church, the Count himself entered. Ismark's hand flew to the hilt of his sword as he stepped between Ireena and the Count, but the Count stayed his blade with a word and a gesture, then looked only to Ireena. In his hand, he carried a black box, tied with a red velvet bow.

"You are so beautiful when you cry," he said, cupping her chin and cheek in his claws. "And you deserve a mourning dress that befits your beauty."

He handed her the box. Ireena's lips curled to a snarl. A braver woman would have hit him across the face with his gift. However, there was something tender about his touch, something she recoiled from inwardly, and something she struggled to resist. Ireena was familiar enough with Count Strahd's charm to know the consequences of succumbing to it. She tried to push the box towards him, but Count Strahd put his hand atop it and slid it back to her. He smiled knowingly, patronizingly. Her stomach churned.

"I do not deserve such generosity, my lord," Ireena gritted between her teeth.

"I know, my love, but I fear your beauty will be the cause of many more funerals. You will need to dress the part of both the mourner and the executioner."

She did not expect the next funeral to be Izek Strazni's. Ismark hadn't wanted to come, but Ireena reminded him of the loneliness at Papa's funeral. They were almost alone here, too. Only the burgomaster and his wife and the church's retinue of staff - the priest, the groundskeeper, and the altar boy - attended. Those guards that were somehow loyal to Captain Strazni stood without, keeping protestors at bay. The rest joined the crowds in celebration. The monster was dead. Incense filled the empty pews. Its hazy clouds swirled in the air, conjuring images of that cramped room, filled with blank-staring, redheaded dolls. The scent reminded her of the fire, which consumed the room and Izek's body. The baron called it a tragic accident, one that Ireena and Ismark were lucky enough to escape. The cheering crowds outside lauded her as a monster slayer. Ireena knew the truth. She agreed with the baron; Izek Strazni's death was nothing but a tragic accident.

Somehow, she did not feel comforted or convinced.

When she was six, Papa took her to receive an exorcism from Father Donavich. It was a commonplace affair for sun-touched children, almost a right of passage. The lines between a child's imagination and the unspeakable horrors that haunted the valley were thin. It started the day Doru called Ismark "Izzy". It was a small thing, but Ireena had giggled, fist over her mouth.

"That's not Izzy," she said.

She'd gone on to describe "Izzy", a tall boy with serious, dark eyes and only one arm. The description so horrified Papa that he had taken her to Father Donavich.

"Please tell me that the Morning Lord's light still reaches her," he'd begged. "Promise me it is not a ghost or damned spirit haunting my child."

Izek Strazni had two arms: one horrifically mutilated, twisted into red, scaly flesh, tipped with claws. Ireena hadn't had reason to think he and the boy from her childhood memories might be the same person. She didn't tell anyone, but the boy she remembered, Izzy, was sad and scared. Other children threw stones and sticks at him for being different. She could not imagine a single person daring to cast a stone at Izek Strazni, captain of Vallaki's guard: feared by all and loved, it seemed, by no one.

She had loved Izzy. She had no concrete memories anymore of the one-armed boy, but whenever she thought of him, however briefly, he filled her with a warm, loving feeling she associated with Ismark. Maybe Izzy had been a dream. Maybe he had been real, but his memory mingled with the thousands of days spent at Ismark's side. The names were similar, after all. She knew better than to bring up her mad visions from childhood to anyone.

Izzy was not on Ireena's mind when she went with Captain Strazni to Vallakovich Manor. There was a tiger on the loose and while Ismark joined the hunting party, the captain of the guard promised he would keep her safe and that he could perhaps use her (admittedly scant) knowledge of medicine to heal the wounded as they were ushered in. She hadn't found it odd, not at first, that the Vallakoviches were nowhere to be seen. The baron was, no doubt, leading the charge. He professed to be a man of the people, after all. The baroness perhaps sheltered in the Church of St. Andral. The baronet… Ireena had not met him. All was well.

Until it wasn't.

Izek led her upstairs of the fine house, past richly colored curtains and finely painted portraits, past mounted animal heads and up a grand staircase. Her father's home had been so worn and frayed compared to the great house here, that she had gotten distracted by its novelty and beauty. She was about to begin a little small talk with Izek. Something silly, in hindsight, something *stupid*. He flung open a door to a dimly lit room and gestured for her to enter.

"You will be safe in here," he said as she stepped in. He followed her swiftly and shut the door. "I will keep you safe here. You will not leave."

Her stomach dropped. In the dim glow of the lamplight, she could see a bed made with crisp, military corners. Above it and all around the room, rows and rows of doll faces peered down on her. Wherever she moved in the small, windowless room, she was watched. Button eyes, painted eyes, fancy stitching… no two were the same, and yet, as Ireena got her bearings, each bore a striking resemblance to the next. Each bore a striking resemblance to *her*. Ireena twisted a hand in her artificially darkened hair and whirled around to face Captain Strazni. His dark eyes, serious as ever, were hazed over with ferocious emotion she couldn't quite read. Pain and relief mingled in his gaze. Something about it reminded her of the Count. Ireena staggered back.

"Not until the tiger is caught," she said.

Captain Strazni said nothing.

"Captain?" she asked. Then, daring to speak his name, "Izek?"

Some kind of scalding pleasure burned his whole body. His eyes wrenched shut. His body seized up and relaxed. Ireena took another step backward, looking for something to hold as a weapon in case he tried to…

Her fingers brushed the scarf around her neck, which hid scars the Count left her with last time they met.

"I have waited so long," Captain Strazni said, "to hear you say my name."

"Oh? How funny. We've only known each other for a week."

"I have known you my whole life," he said. "I have searched for you, longed for you, dreamed of

you…"

He reached towards her with his clawed hand. Ireena turned her head away and caught his hand in hers. It was not reptilian or dead to the touch, but as warm as any mortal flesh. Ireena meant to keep him from grasping her, but now she held her captor's hand in hers and froze. He looked into her eyes and the darkness flickered. For a moment, his eyes looked like hers - a dark, liquid brown - and in excruciating pain.

"Ireena… My 'reena… My Ireena…"

There was a desperate, sing-songy lilt to his voice. It touched on memories she could not recall, only feelings. Love, protectiveness, safety… She squeezed Izek's hand. The large man crumpled around her, holding her tightly, repeating to himself as he sobbed, "Never let you go."

"What do you mean?

He squeezed tighter. Crying out, Ireena strained to pull away from him. Was that her imagination or did she hear footsteps on the stairs?

"Izek-"

He held her tighter. She couldn't breathe easily in his embrace. He would crush her. But that must have been running, frantic scrambling in the hall. Did she dare to dream they were familiar boots against the floor? Maybe they had caught the tiger. Maybe all would be well. Someone would come for the captain and see… But sweet St. Andral, his embrace was tight. He would push all the air from her lungs if he didn't crush her ribs first.

"Please, Izzy, you're hurting me-!"

Her cry died as it stuttered out from her lips, the smallest of screams.

There was a bang upon the door. One, two, three blessed booms. The handle rattled, but the door did not open.

"Ireena?"

Tears streamed from Ireena's eyes. She would know that voice in any time or place.

"Ismark!"

On the other side, scrabbling at the lock, and shoving against the wood, her brother tried to break down the door

"Izzy- Izzy, please-" Ireena pleaded. "Let me go, please. My brother-"

Izek lifted only his clawed arm from her. It wasn't enough to let her escape, but with a motion, a bolt of fire ignited the door. Ismark, on the other side of the flames, yelped. His sword hit the ground with a clatter. So too did a dozen of the dolls. Some landed softly to roast in the fire.

Others, made of porcelain, shattered on the ground.

“Ismark!” Ireena shoved her way out of Izek’s embrace, scratching and kicking him as she struggled free. “What have you done?”

“You are mine,” Izek said. “Mine!”

Coughing from the smoke, Ismark struggled upright.

“Ireena?”

Izek advanced on him. Ireena ducked between them and grabbed a spindly, sharp porcelain arm that had broken off of one of the dolls. She brandished it like a dagger at Izek.

“Why do you fight me?” Izek asked. “I have not hurt you.”

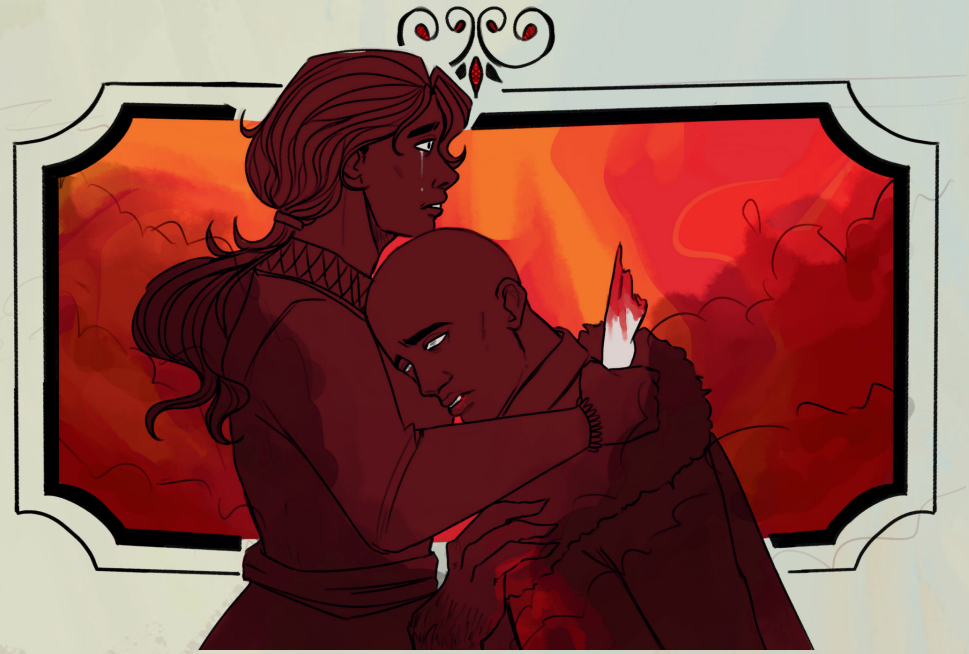
“If you hurt my brother, you hurt me. Izzy, please…”

Everyone in Vallaki had seen the flames. Everyone could agree that Izek Strazni had died in a fire. Not even Ismark had seen the way Izek lunged through the smoke and flame. No one saw Ireena thrust the porcelain arm upwards into his chest, piercing his heart. He slumped over her body. Looking into her eyes, the darkness disappeared. Had it ever been there to begin with?

“Reena…” he croaked.

His voice was small in his big frame. His head slumped against her chest and he stopped moving altogether. His eyes, so like hers, stared vacantly down at Ireena. She reached up and closed them.

“I’m sorry, Izzy,” she murmured. “I’m so sorry.”



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That night, Ireena waited by the window in the Blue Water Inn. She knew the Count would be there waiting for her.

“How does it feel to know that he loved you?” Strahd asked, emerging from the shadows.

“Of course, he didn’t,” Ireena said coldly. This time, she was prepared to resist Strahd’s charm. “The poor man was confused.”

“Was he?” Strahd asked. “What do you know of your life before Kolyan Indirovich found you all alone in the woods?”

“Enough,” Ireena said coldly.

Think. Think back to a time before you knew your family. There was a wolf attack..”

“Yes,” she said. Her own voice sounded distant. “It killed my parents.”

“And what became of your brother?” Strahd asked. “He was older than you - about the same age as your precious Ismark - with dark, serious eyes and only one arm. I know you, Ireena, better than you know yourself.”

Ireena pulled away from the window, hand over her mouth. Between her fingers, she murmured one word: Izzy. Strahd’s mouth twisted bitterly.

“How many brothers will die by your hand before you submit to me, Ireena? I once told you you would be mourner and executioner both. If you marry me, Izek’s funeral could be your last for quite some time.”

In the morning, she wore the dress Strahd had given her at her father’s funeral. Ireena stood quietly beside Ismark at Izek’s burial, watching as the altar boy stuffed Izek’s mouth with garlic and the priest offered hymns to the Morning Lord, that Izek’s soul might be guided to the light.

One day, she would have to watch as someone said those same prayers for Ismark's soul.

Maybe she would have to say those prayers alone.

She looked at Ismark, who held her tightly and had held her all her life, and she leaned against him. Whatever she had to give - her life, her freedom, her soul - she would give to Strahd if he would only spare her brother.

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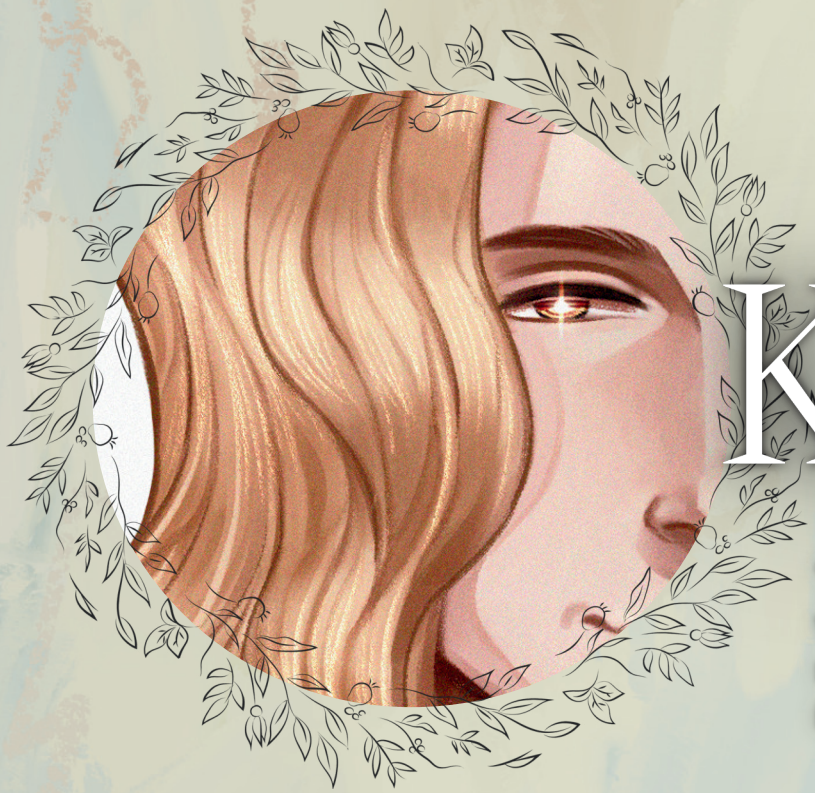


Krezk

featured: kelians

“His sort of compassion was well placed for a priest, but a ruler cannot afford to be so indulgent.“

Virus Viral 2025

Ravenloft

featured: zafflesia

"A rich man thinks all other people are rich, and an intelligent man thinks all other people are similarly gifted. Both are always terribly shocked when they discover the truth of the world."

@cawingcrow

ZAFFLESIA

Picture Perfect

Story by name Kana_Nane

Character(s): Escher, Strahd

☽☽☽

Rain passed over Barovia as a soft, grey veil. Escher watched it fall from the billowing clouds in the sky from his spot at the outlook of Castle Ravenloft. Great. Splendid. His last day as a mortal man and it was overcast and raining?

Picture perfect!

Escher smiled at the pouring rain, barely able to contain his excitement. He found he was only ever happy when the skies were grey, so Barovia would prove to be the perfect home for him, only coming in those very shades. He preferred to be the spot of colour wherever he went, anyway. His newly-made elegant lilac attire was a striking contrast to his rainy backdrop, and nothing could make him happier.

Except the wedding, of course. Soon he would be husband to his handsome Count Strahd von Zarovich, lord of this very castle. Escher was never much for such ceremonies, having had to play at far too many of them back in Waterdeep as a bard, but to finally be wed himself? It made him so giddy he was positively shaking. And after the ceremony, the real wedding would take place, the vampire wedding… Oh, his heart was bursting at the seams from imagining his night with Strahd, as he would make him eternal, just like himself. Taking his blood and giving him his own in return? Ah, so macabre, so romantic!

Fit to become a painting, a centerpiece of their bedchamber. Or crypt, perhaps. The colours would be spared sun damage, at any rate, remaining, just like the two of them, forever young, radiant and splendid. Splendid. Splendid!

Ah, but there were a few hours of daylight left still until then. Escher's very last, before becoming a creature of the night himself, like his sweet betrothed who was still slumbering. With so much love in his heart, the days felt even lonelier now than they had felt before.

It was hard to walk this earth bright-coloured and dazzling, where everyone was either colour blind or pretended to be to fit in. Escher refused to fit in, and certainly refused being a proper little white, a quaint black or an unnoticed grey blotch. The world had so much colour to offer and he was sick of being told not to see. Tired of being unappreciated for being resplendent. His family shunned him, his friends were never real and his recent adventuring party? A great big pack of fools they were.

Warning him against Strahd, the most brilliant vermillion red in this drab country, or perhaps the world. But why would a painter, an artist be afraid of colours?

Escher would bring splendour into their shared afterlife for all eternity. Not that chipped

antique gold of his first wife or faded burgundy of the second, nor that third moving from sunflower into piss… It was time for a new canvas, for the harmony of vermillion and lilac.

Oh, but the wait was excruciating. Escher explored the castle in its rainy gloom to pass the slow flow of time. He climbed the stairs and thought to himself how little he would miss being out of breath. He lit a torch to survey the paintings on the walls and decided it would be marvelous not to need light to see every last detail of craftsmanship within the frames. He went to the dining room to sup all by his lonesome and revelled in the thought of ridding himself of the hassle of needing, consuming and digesting food. He knew he would experience a different type of hunger, of course; he wasn't that naive. But that only meant he could pursue all new delights with his Lord Strahd, chasing highs together, never going hungry, for his husband would always provide for them. Escher had given up on finding happiness in life long ago, and in the end, he was right—he would finally find it in death, and beyond.

Drinking out his very last glass of wine, he did wonder how blood would taste to him after. Thought about how shapes would look, how smells would smell, how sounds would sound in his all-new world. Stepping to Strahd's grand organ at the wall, he pushed down the keys for an absentminded melody, wondering if it would ever ring the same in his ears.

Fear mixed with delight in his heart, Escher sat down properly to play, to savor the notes and the harmonies they made, not knowing if his fingertips would ever be able to conjure them just so, wondering if he would miss them. He was certain everything would be much more magnificent from that night onwards, but… A speck of doubt, a little unease lended marvelous motion to every painting.

His hands were shaking. Motion, indeed. The foolish creeping of life-preserving fear. Escher would die tonight, and he welcomed it, and still, instincts were kicking in. He would not miss this, either. He would give his life for love, like he had so often dreamed…

But his hands wouldn't stop shaking and he made a mistake. Blundered with the pedals and pressed the wrong keys, and… There was a click. There was more movement, set in motion by his doubt and unease.

The back wall of the dining hall opened.

Escher's instincts flooded him like a hunted rabbit. He jumped up to look around, but when he ascertained himself that nobody was around to see that he had uncovered a secret door, he calmed somewhat, steadying his rampant breaths. Undoing the thing was of no use, since he had no idea how he got the wall to open in the first place. He should have left. He could have easily explained the deed to Strahd, who would be sweet and understanding as always, but…

But…

Doubt. Unease. Life-preserving fear.

With slow, quiet steps, Escher approached the gap in the wall he had inadvertently made. There was air coming from within, probably through arrow slits to the outside, carrying with the smell of dust and old things. What would Lord Strahd see fit to keep secret in there? Sure enough, his husband would share everything with him in due time, but…

But…

Escher stepped inside the gloomy interior, torch in hand. His first fright was caused by the loud crack of thunder in that very moment, stopping him dead in his tracks. The next was his

torchlight reflected back at him from all sides. Mirrors. He was surrounded by hundreds of them. Standing against the walls, stacked in heaps, even lying around in broken pieces, mirrors enough to furnish the entire castle. Escher stood in front of a long standing mirror and looked at himself behind a layer of dust and cobwebs. They had talked about this with Strahd—he would no longer be able to see his reflection. But Escher wouldn't miss it, his stupid scared eyes and his hands clutching the torch. He would be glad not to look upon himself ever again as long as Strahd would look at him, instead, and delight in him forever.

His light fell on yet another frame, but this one was non-reflecting. Escher stepped closer and pulled down the half-slipped fabric that had been draped over it, to uncover a painting instead of a mirror. It was rather large, in a splendid gold-gilded frame, but unfinished, some yellowed canvas left strikingly bare at the bottom. The top part had been done with meticulous detail, however. It was a portrait of a man, with beautiful honey-spun hair and eyes shining like mischievous blue diamonds. His mustache looked soft enough to touch, and the smiling line of his lips beneath seemed even softer. The half-finished portrait of a beautiful man. Picture perfect.

As a fellow artist, Escher could tell it was done with meticulous care and tender craftsmanship. And with no money spared on paints, either; the shade used for the lips was quite hard to come by. Judging from the deterioration of the compound, it had been done a great many years ago, too.

Escher did not recognize the face. Strahd had many portraits hanging around the castle, but this man was in none of them. And inspecting further the shape of the brush strokes and the blending technique, Escher surmised that, without a doubt, this painting was done by his husband-to-be, Strahd himself.

Why had he never spoken of this man he had painted with the utmost care for detail? Why had he never finished it?

Escher's heart was pounding, reminding him that he was still alive, unwed and unfinished. Doubt. Unease. Life-preserving fear.

His eyes darted around, searching the edges of the frame for a clue, for a perfectly good explanation as to why Strahd had told him he was the only man he had ever loved and yet being faced with another blonde, hidden away among old reflections and dust. And there, on the bottom plaque, he wiped off the layer of dust with his hand and uncovered a name.

Alek Gwilym

Escher read the name aloud and it reverberated from every surface in the secret room. There was a monumental crash of thunder, and the diamond eyes in the painting glowed with ethereal light. The unfinished hand of the beautiful man tore off the painting and grabbed Escher's shoulder, its fadedness a silent threat to his colour, and the rosy oil paint of his lips cracked monstrously as he opened his void mouth to speak, and Escher didn't want to listen, he wanted to run away, run away from all his doubts and fears to be entombed in the arms of his lover forever, but the beautiful monster Alek Gwilym would not let him go. And he spoke, and Escher was forced to hear:

"You beautiful fool… I will see you soon…"

Then the hand tugged at him and whirled him around, pushing him against the opposite wall. Escher stumbled and caught himself just barely on stone and… what smelled like lacquered wood. A frame. He took a step back to see a magnificent gilded frame, and in it, himself, looking

back at him with hollow eyes, his painted face smudged with painted tears, flowing and flowing and flowing…

Escher screamed aloud, and shielding his eyes from the horrors, he ran. The light of the dining hall was not far, he would make it…!

A hand grabbed his shoulder as he was about to step out the secret door and Escher screamed again, dropping his torch on the stone. But instead of painted nightmares, it was Lod Strahd's face he saw, and sobbing, he jumped into his arms, telling him he was sorry, over and over again. And Strahd held him, almost suffocating him with his tight loving embrace, his claws lovingly digging into his back as he told him not to cry.

"It is time," Strahd said to him, and let Escher go for long enough to close the wall behind them again, then held out his hand for him to take. And Escher took it eagerly, wishing for his own warmth to fade to finally match his bethrothed's cool touch.

Count Strahd von Zarovich led Escher by the hand, smiling, asking him about his last living day as though the incident in the dining hall had never happened. Escher had almost blissfully forgotten it by the time Strahd led him inside the door.

Until he saw it. The easel in front of the sofa in Strahd's study, with a fresh canvas on it.

"I should like to paint your portrait," the Lord said, "to immortalize your beauty in this manner, too."

Escher stood silent, like a hunted rabbit that started to feel the sting of the shot in its back.

"But you will remind me of it yourself, won't you, my lord?" His voice was like always, jovial and melodic, but to himself, it sounded like the dying whimpers of an animal.

"Of course," Lord Zarovich smiled and bid him to sit on the sofa before the easel, and as the sun had finally set and Strahd dipped his brush instead of lilac into vermillion red, Escher knew he was lying.

And then he closed his dazzling eyes and chose not to see.

☽

witchscience

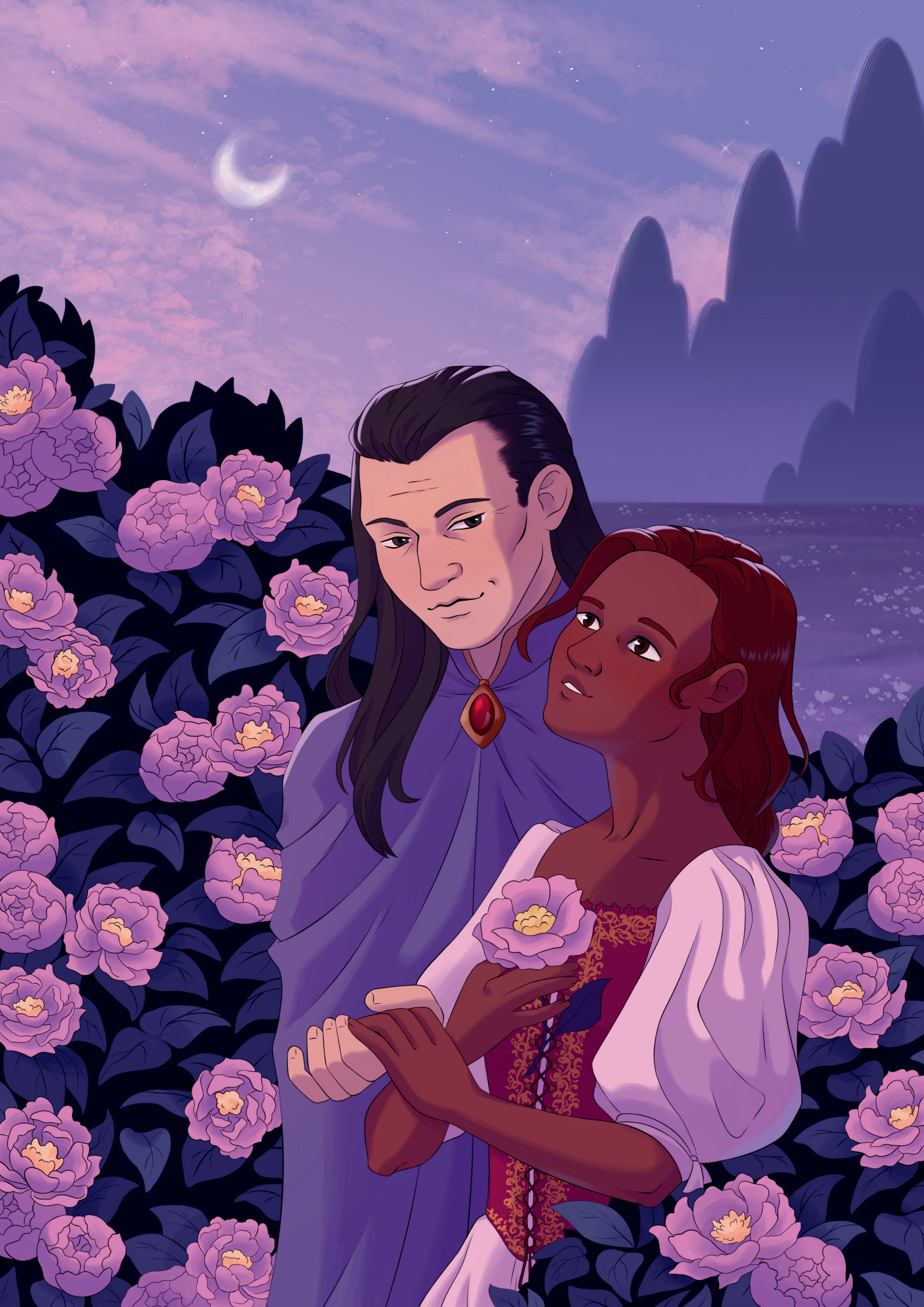
The Curse

“I looked at my brother across the table, where we’d shared our first private meal together, and saw myself in him, myself as I should have been. Not that I begrudged Sergei his own life, but that mine had been all but used up, sacrificed to the demands of duty and obligation.”

ein meegle

MEMENTO MORI · SEMPER FAMI

MEMENTO MORI · SEMPER FAMIL



Lavender and Smoke

Story by BatPrincess
Illustrations by IvoryScribbles
Character(s): Vasili von Holtz, Tatyana Incarnation

☽☽☽

The air smelled of dried wheat. The clutches of fall had descended on the valley, making the evening air snap at Vasili's every breath. He didn't mind, his hands bundled in his leather gloves, so thick he only had a vague sense of the reigns in his grasp. A cloak lined with fur was fixed to his shoulder, keeping back the chill of the approaching night. Through the red sky of sunset, he saw the pinprick of light coming from the farmhouse. The timing wasn't ideal, but his work took him to every corner of the valley at all hours, even a lonely farm just at the edge of nightfall.

He knocked on the door, doing his best to stand as unassuming as possible. Years of no one welcoming the tax man had taught him to keep his confidence and vanity in check. Luckily, a frail old woman with her hair tightly pulled back opened the door. At least he could attempt charm.

"Hello ma'am, my name is Vasili von Holtz and I am here to collect your annual dues as required by the Lord of the land."

The woman wrinkled her nose —a typical reaction —and called over her shoulder.

"Lorne, it's for you!"

The door closed for a moment and when it reopened a man twice Vaslili's size stood before him. He had arms like tree trunks and a stern face with a nose that had been broken at least once. He wiped his dirty hands on his shirt, regarding Vasili's refinery with disdain.

"You be wanting our money?"

"On the contrary sir. I only wish to collect the money that rightfully belongs to Strahd Von Zarovich."

The man's face remained unimpressed.

"You be wanting our money."

After curt responses and many grunts, Vasili found himself standing in the center of the houses' foyer. Lorne, slipped off into one of the rooms, leaving Vasili to nervously shuffle amongst the mundane sounds of the house. Somewhere beyond he heard the clattering of an active kitchen, the shuffle of feet and the giggle of children.

"We have the tea kettle on, if you need to warm up," a soft voice said.

Vasili looked up and felt his heart nearly stop. Before him stood a young woman with a warm blush to her cheeks and piercing green eyes. Framing her face was a full mane of red hair that spilled down her back, wild and curled like smoke and fire. She was petite but stood planted as firmly as an oak. She smiled and asked again, "Tea sir?"

Vasili ran his hands frantically through his hair, trying to compose himself. "Oh um, yes, of course Miss—?"

"Dasha, sir. And you are?"

"Forgive me," he pulled himself into a bow, "Vasili von Holtz."

"What a title," she giggled. "I suppose they do make gentlemen in this valley."

Vasili laughed. "My mother certainly tried to cut me from a more refined cloth, though she'd still say I'm a barbarian compared to her expectations."

A warm smile curled from Dasha's rose petal lips. "You'd certainly give the folks in these parts a run for their money."

"Ahem," Lorne stood there holding a small sack. "It's all here."

Vasili clasped his hands. "Splendid! If it is no offense, I must count it before I leave. I have a process I must follow."

"You can count it on the road, cause like I said, it's all here."

Dasha went to her father, gently resting a hand on his shoulder. "Oh papa, relax. Mr. von Holtz only means to do his job. Besides, I just offered him tea."

Lorne grunted but nodded in a way that made the girl smile. Vasili was led to a chair and small table where he began his routine. Dasha appeared softly with the tea, doing her best to not interrupt his

counting. Despite their equal efforts to focus, Vasili had to begin his count again twice. By the time Vasili completed his task, the night crickets were conducting a full chorus. He thanked the farmer for his cooperation and stood in the doorway, lost for words.

"Papa?" Dasha appeared beside her father. "Papa, it's so late. It can't be safe for Mr. von Holtz to be on the road."

Lorne shrugged. "He should have timed his trip better."

"Papa! Be reasonable. We have no farm hands this time of the year. The spare room is all made up."

"I couldn't impose," Vasili said, though his racing heart was begging to stay. Dasha and her father continued a silent back and forth with their eyes that told Vasili one thing: The farmer was wrapped around his daughter's finger. Soon Vasili was given a thick and flavorful stew and the heel of a crusty, warm bread. The girl smirked as he ate, busying herself with mending clothes near the fire. Vasili caught her eyeing him a few times.

"You're very kind, Dasha," he finally worked himself up to say, just before Dasha turned in for the night.

"It's no trouble." She stopped herself and turned to him. "There's an extra quilt in the wardrobe. I made it myself."

Vasili laid under that quilt, swearing traces of Dasha's scent lingered in the fabric. For a farm girl, she possessed an elegance, like a bright lavender bush thriving amongst the dominating tangles of mint. He listened to the house stir and thought of the girl's warm smile. For once, he was already looking forward to his next visit.

When morning came, Vasili bundled up for the road before leaving his room. Dasha was in the dining room tending to several small children who quarreled about nothing in particular. She regarded his cloak and gloves.

"You're leaving early, Mr. von Holtz? Surely you need breakfast first?"

"Please, Miss Dasha, call me Vasili and I'm afraid I must go."

"Then you must call me Dasha. I'll fix you a breakfast that can travel."

"I'd like that."

Vasili and Dasha's goodbye was nothing profound, but the look in the girl's eyes told him she too looked forward to his next visit. As he left the property, Vasili swore the smell of dried wheat was now blended with lavender.

****

There was no accidentally visiting a remote farm in Barovia, so when Vasili entered the property, it was very much on business. The licks of fall's chill were replaced with a bitter biting of winter fangs, its frothing mouth covering the stretching fields in gray sheets of snow. When he knocked, the full house seemed silent with only smoke puffing from the chimney like gasping breaths.

A boy with auburn hair opened the door, squinting.

"Is your papa available?"

The boy's eyes fell to his feet. "Papa is gone."

Vasili couldn't hide his surprise. So much could change in a season and the farmer had seemed remarkably sturdy for his age.

"I'm sorry. Could I speak to you mama then?"

"She's gone too."

His heart fell. If illness had fallen so hard upon the house than maybe Dasha was –

"Who's at the door, Porter?"

The panic sinking into Vasili's feet burst up to his chest. Dasha appeared behind her brother, dark circles weighing under her once bright eyes. At the sight of Vasili, a smile burst from her cheeks.

"Go wash up the littles for supper, I'll speak to Mr. von Holtz."

"Vasili, please."

The girl's eyes welled with tears. "Oh Vasili, I know why you're here and I'm in an awful place. Mama and Papa were taken by a fever and the harvest wasn't nearly as profitable as last year. I don't have enough to cover the payment you seek."

The girl heaved with grief, sinking down to her knees before him. Vasili threw his cloak over her shoulders and pulled the door shut so the children didn't hear their poor sister. He smoothed her hair, the lavender scent mixed with the brine of her tears.

"There, there Dasha. We can work something out. Lord Strahd isn't made of stone. I'll speak with him personally."

The girl looked up at him with eyes too glossy and fragile.

"You'd truly do that?"

Vasili took a deep breath. "I'd do even more than that. I'd pluck you from this sad place this very moment if you wanted. It's clear there's nothing left for you here."

Dasha sniffled. “Oh Vasili.” His heart leapt; she was nearly his. “I can’t.”

“What?” He snapped much harder than he meant to. He felt the girl recoil and he quickly steadied himself. “What I mean is, why do you cling to this place?”

“It’s not the place. My brothers and sisters. There’s nine of us and I'm by far the eldest.”
“We can find a place for them.”

“I couldn't force such a sizable burden on you.”

“Vasili firmly cupped the girl’s cheeks in his strong hands. For a flicker of a moment, Dasha tried to pull away, but he held fast.

You will never be my burden,” he said.

Dasha breathed deep, steadying herself. “I need more time. Give me until next spring. I will make a plan. I owe them as much as their big sister.”

Vasili held her face for a moment longer, his eyes severe with uncertainty. Why wouldn’t she see the savior he was trying to be for her? Still, one more season of waiting was nothing against a lifetime.

“Very well,” he said, releasing her cheeks. Only then did he notice his nails had scratched Dasha’s gentle skin, mixing the smell of lavender with the prickle of iron.

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Instead of the expected smell of flowers, spring made the farm smell of mud. Vasili rode down the farm path for what he hoped would be the final time. It wasn’t long before he heard the music and smelled the bonfire. In front of the house was a large fire where a crowd danced around in a linked circle to jovial music. It was through the flames that he saw Dasha, her hands locked with the other young girls, a crown of lavender in her wildfire hair. She was like a dream.

Dasha met his eyes but instead of the expected thrill she looked concerned. She dropped out of the dance and bounded over to him on bare feet.

“It seems you’ve fallen on far happier times, my dear Dasha.”

The girl looked sheepishly at the ground.

“My aunt and uncle came and brought a few friends to help turn things around.”

“That’s perfect! Now your siblings are cared for.” He took her hand. “There’s nothing forcing you to stay here.”

Dasha tried to pull her hand away but Vasili held tight. “No one is forcing me to stay here. I want to be here. It’s where I belong.”

His grip tightened. “You’re joking, my dear. Tell me you’re joking?” He searched her face for answers, but found only her watery eyes. “Why would you choose this life over what I can provide?”

“This is my home.”

“But it doesn’t have to be.” He pulled her in close. “There is so much about me you don’t know yet.”

“Is there a problem, Dasha?” A man appeared beside the girl. He stood as tall as Vasili with wavy brown hair and rough hands that had seen years of work. He looked at Vasili’s grip on Dasha with intensity brewing in his oak eyes. All at once Vasili understood.

“Him? You’d pick him over me?”

Dasha pulled free from his grip and he noticed the ring on her finger. A metallic smell twisted with his beautiful lavender.

And then he heard it.

No one else could possibly hear it, not even Dasha who carried the noise inside of her. But Vasili heard the tiny heart beat louder than all the festivities that surrounded them. Dasha’s hand drifted to her belly.

“You didn’t.” He said quietly, he doubted Dasha heard. “You ungrateful bitch!” He spat the words so loud the party all at once paused around him.

“Mr. von Holtz,” Dasha fell back into the arms of the farm boy. “I think you should –”

“Leave? Begone? Get off your land?” A laugh dark and guttural burst from him like puss from a festering wound. “Oh my dear Dasha, this land was never yours to begin with. It was always mine.”

“What do you–”

Vasili’s feet lifted ever so slightly from the ground. “All this time I waited. I finally found you and still I waited. I wanted to give you time. I wanted to treat you with the charm I thought you deserved and this is how you repay me?”

The sky grew dark, swirling with a storm that poured out from nowhere.

“You cast me aside. You carry a brat inside of you who will no doubt be just as ungrateful.”

Vasili wasn't sure if he felt the heat of the fire or his anger, but he knew he burned. His vision blurred and all at once the world seemed to slow. He shot his hands out to grab Dasha but the farm boy pushed her away so he easily redirected his grip to the boy's throat, lifting him off the ground. Vasili savored how quickly the boy's bravado melted to pure panic. It was sweet like honey.

He pulled the struggling boy easily to his mouth, the man that was once Vasili melting away like candle wax. Beneath was a man much older with flaming red eyes, gray pale skin and slicked back black hair. He smiled, revealing two sharp fangs that tore into the farm boy's throat. The screams of the guests filled the man's ears as he drank. He dully flicked his fingers and from the trees beyond emerged countless wolves that chased all who fled. The man finished the boy off and thoughtlessly tossed the lifeless body into the hungry bonfire. He breathed in the panic around him when something smashed across his back. The man didn't flinch, turning lazily to see Dasha holding a broken pitchfork.

"Vasili?" She searched his face for the boy he once was.

He shook his head. "He's no more, my dear."

"Who are you?"

He shot out his hands like a snake, taking her by the hair and forcing her to look up at him.

"I am Strahd von Zarrovich and I am the land."

The girl tried desperately to strike him but he stood firm. He gently cupped her cheek with his claw-like hands, his rage cooling to a true sadness.

"I thought this time was finally ours, Tatyana. Perhaps we will get it right next time."

He bent over to kiss the girl's cheek, breathing in the smell of lavender one last time before snapping her neck. Strahd placed her down gently, the bonfire expanding out to eat away all traces of the celebration. He stood there, unburned as the flames grew, swelled and eventually died out.

"Until next time, my love," he said, trying to breathe deep of Dasha's sweetness but all that remained was smoke.

Split Silk

Story by BarovianBallads
Art by VirusVisal
Character(s): Strahd, Tatyana

☽☽☽

Stained-glass daylight and the fragrance of flowers fill the chapel of Castle Ravenloft. The noble families murmur politely within their clusters, while uniformed servants bustle back and forth in the background. I wait beside the grand stone platform, upon which an acolyte lights the candles on the altar.

I see my brother in the front pew. My brother? I see my brother in the front pew, but I can't see him clearly. I look harder. He is not far away. I can see the noble behind him quite clearly. I know he is my brother. But I can't quite perceive the contours of his face or even the color of his hair. Is it fair? Is it raven-black touched with gray? His distorted face smiles at me, but it's a misshapen and warped grin.

The clatter of the chapel doors closing draws my attention, and the voices of the symphony rise up: flute, clarinet, and strings. I step up onto the stone platform alongside the priest. The music holds us in suspense, for a moment that is all but an eternity, for I know who is coming.

But at last, the melody shifts to the bridal march, and the chapel doors open.
My heart leaps at the sight of my bride, my Tatyana.

She shines; everything else is dim next to her rare beauty. She is perfection. She is every dream, day and night; she is every hope in white silk and lavender lace. Her steps are sure and certain, eager to be where I am. Under her veil, her gaze is surely fixed on me and me alone.

At last, she arrives in front of me. She is near enough to touch, to take in her fragrance. The lace trembles under my fingers as I lift up her veil. Beaming at me, she is joy, framed with auburn hair and a wedding headdress. Radiant and youthful, her deep skin is dewy and taut over her firm and full cheeks. The old jewels of Ravenloft pale in comparison to the treasure of a girl who now wears them around her neck. Bright and clear, her eyes call me Love of My Youth, My Future, My Beloved, My Life.
"You may take hands," says the priest.

I put out my hands for her and my hands...my hands are wrong. My hands are too smooth, too slender. They are unspotted by age, uncalloused from battle, unstained with blood–

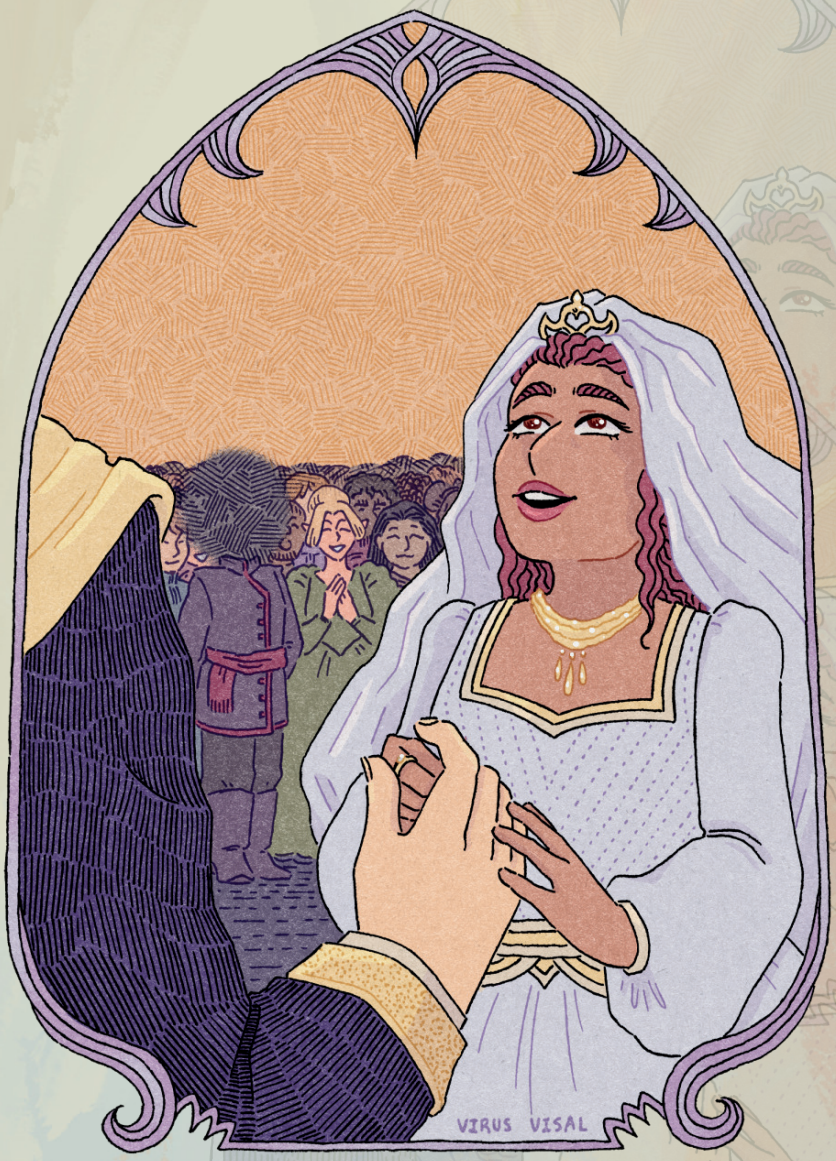
Tatyana places her hands in mine, unbothered by my hands, finding them familiar. She smiles wider, interlacing our fingers in an innocent, girlish way.

"Tatyana, do you surrender your whole self to this man, to belong to him and him alone for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," she vows breathlessly, her voice sweet and earnest. My heart pounds, harder and louder than thunder in my chest.

"You may kiss your bride."

Tatyana tilts her face up to me, eyes falling low and lovely. Her full, flushed lips part slightly. Her hands are pulling me closer–



Suddenly, her face of radiant affection freezes. Her jaw yawns wide, every muscle tense, teeth bared in agony. Her eyes flash open, filled with horror and tears. A spray of blood flickers into existence across her skin. My ears ring with her scream.

I look down and see myself– no, Sergei. I see Sergei dead at Strahd's feet. Yes, at my feet. My younger brother's neck is pierced, streaming with the same blood that I feel warm on my mouth, trickling down my throat. My hands are battle calloused and creased with age.

I, Strahd, open my arms to embrace Tatyana, deathless for her.

She flees, as the scream reaches a fever pitch in my ears.

My senses flicker and fail.

It's quiet now.

Everyone is quiet now, on the ground, painted red.

We are in the garden of Ravenloft, dusk falling beyond the overlook. Tatyana sits on the stone bench, curled over herself, weeping into her hands. I speak softly to her, kneeling beside her, but the words come out too fast, too slow, too quiet. The pact is for her sake. We can be together, now and forever.

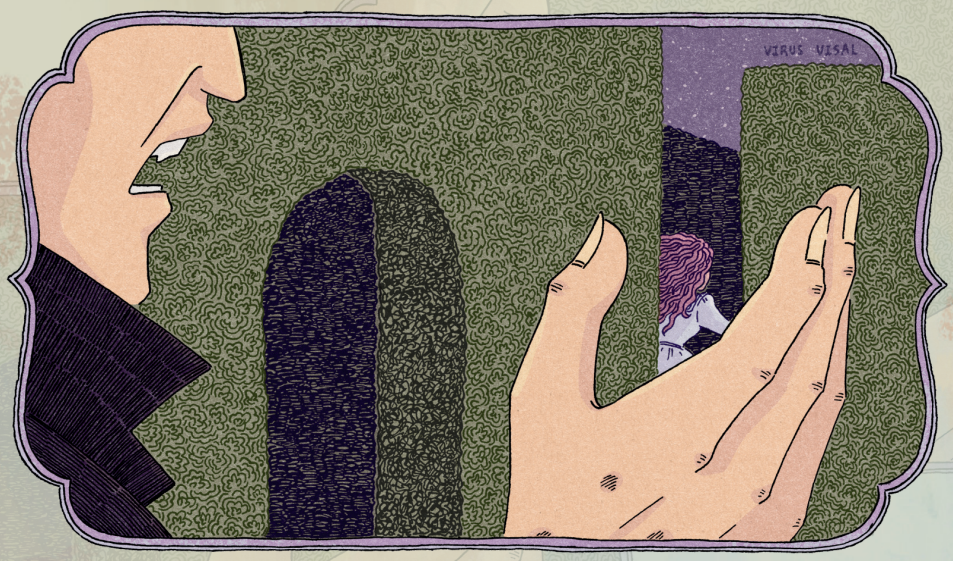
But she does not listen, her weeping uninterrupted, unslowed, as if I were not there at all. She flees from me, even as I am mid-word. My desperation sparks into white-hot rage and I shout

commands for her to stop, all unheeded.

She runs deeper into the garden, through the entrance of the hedge maze. There is no hedge maze in the Ravenloft garden.

I follow her, catching a glimpse of white silk disappearing around the next green corner. I sprint, more than fast enough to catch her, but she is gone. I run through the maze, left and right and left, my claws raking the hedges into jagged edges.

The maze splits once more, and merrily now, she runs to the left and I follow in pursuit. But, then far behind me, I hear her laughter. I change course and follow the laughter, only to meet a dead end.



Her voice hisses in my ear, “Old One.”

I whip around, but there is no one there. The maze now stretches under my feet and above my head, leafy staircases going in every impossible direction. Her laughter turns into impish cackling, miles away.

“Elder.”

Sprinting, I turn corner after corner, and climb hedge-stairs up and down. More laughter, mocking and spiteful, as my breath quickens with panic.

“Brother.”

I snarl.

A word echoes from all sides: “Death.”

I turn another corner of a hedge and there is an escape, the door to a stone tower. Weary, I ascend the gray staircase. From the window, I hear the voice of my mother resonating from the dusk-grey heavens.

“I wish you were Sergei.” Sobs shudder from the sky which leaks both sunlight and rain. “I wish you were dead.” Her voice is strained with tears and disgust. “I wish you were never born from me.”

At the top of the tower, winds whip around me into a familiar frenzy, pushing me out to the top of Castle Ravenloft’s walls. Below, there is an endless cliff.

Tatyana stands on the walls of Ravenloft, her bare feet on the cold gray stone. With all her strength, she throws herself off the walls.

I reach for her, the tips of my fingers only brushing the silk of her dress. She falls, embracing the empty air with her hands unclenched and her eyes gently closed. Down and down, she shrinks smaller and smaller until she vanishes beyond a curtain of hanging mist.

Then there is nothing. Not a sound. Not a crash. Not a scream.

Grief and horror rips through me, fresh and sharp and deep.

Then, there she is before me again, standing on the walls of Ravenloft. Gasping, I reach for her, more desperately, but my hands go no further, my feet frozen in place. I cannot manage to even grasp her dress, only brushing it in the exact same place on the hem. And she falls again, vanishes again.

She appears. I reach. I fail. She falls.

Again. Again. Again. The skirt hem starts to wear thin at the place where my hand always fails to grasp her dress.

Again. Again. Again. The stars stream and streak toward the horizon, leaving only unmeasured darkness.

Tatyana, falling, reaching, failing.

The threadbare silk splits under my fingertips.

Two figures appear in the corner of my vision. I turn to look, and see another Tatyana on the wall and another Strahd reaching for her, but she too falls in the exact same motion and he brushes the silk of her dress in the exact same spot.

I blink, and there are a thousand Tatyana's lining an unending wall. In perfect unison, they leap down into the darkness, every motion the same as each other, the same as the very first time.
One more Tatyana appears before me. As she jumps, I reach, but this time, I clench her dress in my fist, into my iron grip.

Hope courses through me. I heave with furious strength; I pull her towards me with every muscle in my body.

All at once, fluttering before me, there is only white silk. I watch as it falls, empty and shapeless in my hand.

From the mist, her sweet voice says, choked with sorrow: "You are not death. You are worse than death."

My eyes open to the black wood of my coffin lid. The past and present settle into their familiar shapes of truth, but the torment lingers far longer.

☽

Shrimari · Shrimpari '25

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IRI
WIN
GED
2025

Gravetender

Story by shinyivyleaves

Character(s): Rahadin

☽☽☽

There was an acrid melancholy to the catacombs. It hung in the air like a miasma, heavy and thick. The tension of it threatened to choke lesser men, steal the warmth from their bones and whisk away their spirits.

Rahadin walked those dark, dour halls unflinchingly. They were as much his home as any other part of Castle Ravenloft.

Spirits both real and imagined lurked in the shadows, but their pleas and platitudes did not sway him. He was not so faint of heart as to let himself be swayed from his duty. And there was no solace he would offer even if he let them divert him from his path.

Even in the darkness he could navigate easily. He had learned to eschew light long ago, for all its burdens and troublesome revelations. The dark suited him just fine; he had no need for anything else.

But there was light down here, even if sparse. Grand statues flanked either side of the shimmering veil that guarded the tomb of his Lord's forebears. The radiance illuminated the stairs descending even further down into the castle depths, though its light did not reach as far as it should; the darkness that enveloped the castle was too great. Once, Rahadin might have stood before it, taken a moment to marvel at the feat of magic and engineering that this tomb guard represented. Now, he merely snapped his fingers to dispel the barrier of light that would repel all who were not deemed worthy.

Such protections were never meant to keep out family.

If not for the faint layer of dust that had begun to gather on the tombs of King Barov and Queen Ravenovia, it would have appeared they were utterly untouched even by the passage of the days since Rahadin last visited. Without the light from the barrier, the resplendent mosaic did not shine, but Rahadin still took a moment to behold the grandeur of the man and woman that had taken him as theirs, as unflinching and steadfast as they were in life, and the dark stone tombs that contained all they were anymore.

A doleful tone rang distantly, hollowly inside him. He knew, in his Lord's grief, that he rarely visited this chamber where his parents were laid to their final rest. A life of dedication to his father's war, and he would never get to enjoy the spoils. A grand triumph to finally build this

monument to his mother's brilliance, and she never got to see it. Their bodies offered no solace, no recognition, no approval for their eldest son. Thus he would withhold his grief from them in return.

His Lord had every right to his despair, and Rahadin would always and forever honor that. But Rahadin had his own grief, and his own duty. Thus, he tended to their parents' graves in his brother's place. Careful hands wiped away the barest layers of dust that had begun to gather on the stone, polished the glass until the cliffside could be seen clearly even through the dark. There were no riches to account for, no relics to maintain; all had been passed on to their son, as the dead had no use for such frivolities.

He did not pray. He did not speak to them. He knew that no one would listen if he did.

What would they think if they could see what had become of their family? Would they mourn or celebrate the man his Lord had become? Would they prioritize their youngest in his death as they had prioritized him in his life? Would they finally offer Rahadin the atonement he needed for all his failures?

He did not know, and it was fruitless to speculate. There was nothing to be gained by chasing ghosts, by disturbing the rest of the dead, by yearning for a past long gone. All there was left was to tend to their final resting place so that they might find the peace they were due.

This, at least, was something they would be satisfied with. A tomb befitting their regality, and a dutiful son to maintain it as the days wore on into centuries.

The veil of light closed behind him as he made his way back up stairs that had been seen by so few living souls. There was still much work to do.

For all the darkness that Castle Ravenloft held, it also cradled the only place where one could find something resembling sunlight in Barovia. Young Sergei's tomb was resplendent in its radiance, just as the man himself had once been many centuries ago. And yet even through the brightness there was a softness, a gentleness, as though the marble walls were holding young Sergei's memory with grief and longing and reverence.

For a moment, Rahadin just stood in the threshold of the tomb, taking in the light and the love and the melancholy the space exuded. The space was full of contradictions, where young Sergei had been straightforward almost to a fault. Somehow it fit him perfectly, and yet it didn't fit him at all.

Even after all this time, Rahadin couldn't shake his regret over young Sergei's fate. For all his faults, he had been a wonderful young man—kind, valiant, dutiful, devoted. If given the chance, he could have done incredible things. He could have made his family proud. But instead…

Instead, he chose love over duty, idealism over faith. Instead, that beautiful, misguided soul found his way to tragedy. Instead, Rahadin was left to tend to his tomb.

Though there was never much work to be done. The white marble walls and columns never lost their splendor to wear or grime; the resplendent coffin never gathered dust. Every time Rahadin entered the tomb, it was as pristine as it was when young Sergei was first interred. If the gods offered such solaces, he might think it was a miracle. In truth, it was likely some strange magic, protecting the

tomb from the ravages of time, just as death offered that same protection to the entombed himself.

Rahadin came anyway. He had a duty to fulfill. Tending to young Sergei's grave was just as much about the ritual of it all as it was about the appearance of the site when the work was complete. It was a show of respect, a way of saying that young Sergei was not forgotten, not even in death. He may not have won great victories in battle, may not have been annointed as a saint, but even if Barovia forgot Sergei von Zarovich, his family would not.

Rahadin would not mourn. He would not wonder what could have been. But he also would not forget. That much, he could offer the man who once may have been his brother.

(That much, and no more. His duty, his fidelity, his bond was always to his Lord first and foremost. Never did he regret where he lay his loyalties. He had chosen his path willingly, knowingly, and would do so again a thousand times over. But sometimes, staring at the way young Sergei's tomb reflected impossible light, he allowed himself to wish that things could have been different.)

The light, gentle as it was, began to hurt if he lingered for too long. After so long in the dark, the broken promise of something brighter *burned*. His duty done, Rahadin swept out of the tomb, still pristine and timeless as though he had never been there at all.

The serenity of young Sergei's tomb did not extend to the rest of the catacombs. Shadows grasped at his feet like clawed hands searching for deliverance he could not offer. The halls echoed with the sounds of mourning, too faint to hear and yet impossible to drown out. Centuries of dust and grief clouded the air, a world of difference from the clean, crisp air of the forests of home. Even Rahadin could not quite call himself comfortable in this harsh place; even he did not like to linger longer than was necessary.

Where young Sergei's tomb was bright, warm, welcoming, Lord Strahd's tomb was dark, foreboding, hostile. The darkness in this place was absolute, far moreso than anywhere else in the catacombs, threatening to choke anyone who did not belong. The air was cold, a chill that went deeper than bone, as though trying to seep the life out of any who entered.

But for all the malice that the tomb exuded, for all the great power and station of Lord Strahd, the interior of the tomb itself was simple. There were no grand decorations, no intricate carvings or marble statutes depicting the great deeds of the man who had conquered Barovia. The only hint to the significance of the place was the *weight* in the air, and the wooden coffin carved with such care and diligence.

Rahadin stepped gracefully onto the dirt floor of his Lord's tomb—the gravesoil was vital to the maintenance of his eternal countenance, his Lord had once said—otherwise Rahadin would have cleared it out long ago. A slow loop around the perimeter of the space allowed him to wipe away any stray grime from the walls, but more importantly gave him the chance to absorb the atmosphere of the place that was, in a way, central to his Lord. Despite the way the air was heavy with power and implications, *this* was the part of the catacombs Rahadin found himself most comfortable. There was a solace here, a familiarity, even through all the grief and regret that made the air thick with shadow.

Once, he had been ready to see his Lord interred, permanently, into a tomb like this. Perhaps he would have served his Lord's children, or perhaps he would have been released from service, but

unless he laid down his life to protect his Lord, his own life would continue far beyond the life of the man he bound himself to. And he had made peace with that. But he could not pretend that he was not happy for this twist of fate; to be able to serve until the end of his days, to see his Lord's coffin as a source of rebirth and not ending, was nothing short of a gift.

And yet…

He placed a hand atop his Lord's coffin. The wood was cold to the touch. Even after all this time, he didn't know where it came from. It had just appeared, after Barovia had been pulled into the Mists, as though a promise and a threat.

Lord Strahd was many things. He was a great and powerful and merciless ruler. He was a genius tactician and a fierce warrior. He was one of the most brilliant mages Barovia had ever seen. He was a devoted brother, both to the brother he had killed and to the brother he had adopted.

And he was also *tired*. Few even within Castle Ravenloft could see it, but Rahadin knew his Lord better than anyone. Years of darkness and torment and isolation had worn away at him surer than water against a stone. The flame of his heart was dying, slowly but surely, and Barovia as it was had few sparks to reignite it. He may not lie in his coffin, but he was withering as though he was, and Rahadin could do naught but watch.

Rahadin would do *anything* for his Lord, but he could not set him free.

He skimmed his hand across the top of the coffin before finally drawing it away. There was no dirt to be found, but there rarely ever was. Even his hand didn't leave a trace.

Tending to the tombs was about the ritual of it, the show of respect, just as much as it was about maintaining them. Rahadin was nothing if not a dutiful servant. He would serve the von Zarovich family, even in death, even if it didn't matter at all.

☽

Lavender Eyes

Story by curseofsergei
Art by notpink-ri
Character(s): Rahadin, Kasimir

❩❩❩

A collection of diary entries .....

Entry #1: 5/3/176
When the sun came up I went to the lake to catch a fish for Mother. She likes the fish with the purple scales, and says that it tastes the sweetest. I hope it's true! I took my fishing pole (given to me by my father for my 50th birthday) and went. There were so many kinfolk this morning. I hid where they couldn't see me. My father carved roses on the pole. It's my favorite.

Someone new was at my spot. She sat on a log dipping her feet in the water. She had no shoes at all! But her dress looked really fancy. We didn't talk much, but she didn't bother me. I'm not used to meeting kinfolk my age. I liked sitting quietly next to the girl. I didn't catch a fish though. I didn't even see one with purple scales. I hope it really exists.

Entry #2: 5/7/176
I went back to the lake today. I saw that girl again, and she laughed at me because I didn't catch a fish. I was mad at first, but then she fell in the lake. She was embarrassed but she laughed a lot. She told me her name was "Kasi". She said it was her future name, when we come of age. She seems around my age, so that's going to be soon. She asked my name and I told her the name I will choose too. My mom doesn't know yet, and I don't want her to find out. Kasi's eyes are bright purple, like the lavender my mother grows outside the window.

Entry #3:7/1/201

Melancholy haunts my thoughts again, leading me to that old lake. I stopped by, per request of my mother. "It's *a wonderful place to calm your nerves*," she says. I could not argue.

There, I met a man around my age. We talked a little while about the wasps the Barovians were bringing over from their land. It devours many of our natural insects…such an invasive creature.

But…besides that…I couldn't stop looking into his eyes. They were a deep purple, but the light of the lake made them glow. It felt familiar, somehow. I couldn't quite explain it. I felt lured in.

I couldn't stop myself. I wrapped my hand around his back and kissed him.

Entry #4: 8/1/201

Autumn is here. I met Kasimir by the lake, as promised. There he stood, wearing a new fur around his neck. A dark brown fur; I forgot to ask from which beast. I handed him a gardenia flower, which he wore in his hair. We watched festivities across the lake. The autumn festival is my favorite. That brisk smell in the air mixed with food, spice, and lovely perfume….he wanted us to be there, together. I wish we could, too. One day, I hope to celebrate the change of seasons with him.

Entry #5: 12/4/201

Kasi is here in my bed now. He's fighting with his family–notably, his sister. I'm not certain the subject…I didn't want to pry as he becomes quite fragile when upset. I worry, however, that it is about……

Entry #6: 2/4/226

Today, I am a man. I told my mother my chosen name–Rahadin. She said, "It was a wonderful way to honor my grandfather"

…. Kasimir was there at my ceremony. Of course, his entire family were.

I could see determination in his eyes. Soon, he will tell them the truth. I hope to see him glow.

Entry #7:10/23/226

He met by my window last night. Kasimir is his name. He looked so happy. How his family took this, I'm not certain. He insisted though, that soon, he will next tell his family about us; and I will tell mother and father about him. We intend to marry, given they allow it. My mother will be thrilled. Although I worry about his own.

Entry #8: 1/1/346

A man from the neighboring kingdom of Barovia…. King Barov…..began his perversion upon the valley. My family and I are going to be moving to the larger settlement across the lake to fight alongside our kinfolk. Once we arrive, my father and I will promise an oath to our people. Kasimir lives there–likely, he will swear that same oath. How I do wish I were moving there under better circumstances. My father gave me a sword this evening. There is a small engraving of that "purple fish" my mother so often spoke about when I was young.

Entry #9: 6/5/346

I am writing this now several moons after the incident that led me to where I am now. Here I am, in King Barov's castle–training his teen-aged son on the sword. The boy, Strahd, is rather good, but requires guidance. He is impulsive and does not know how to apply his strength effectively. A ferocious youth.

His father, the King–rescued me. My resilience impressed his majesty; leading me to where I am today. The young master has a younger brother at the Abbey, studying the order. He speaks of him frequently, and just tonight told me a story that I felt a certain kinship to. A young Strahd fighting against invaders of their own while his younger brother and his mother hid in the room behind. His father saved him there; just as he did me. His mother currently resides at the Abbey with Sergei. I can sense the young master's anxiety.

I will turn his son into a fine soldier.

Entry #10 4/18/350

King Barov has died.

12/1/352

Queen Ravenovia has died. His majesty is grief-stricken. News delivered by courier.

Entry #11: 12/12/352

"There is great strength in a man who remains strong for his people; yet allows himself to weep with his kin." - Something my grandfather once said

Prince Sergei has arrived. I found him weeping in His Majesty's room. Strahd held himself high, although his eyes always betray him. He wanted to weep with Sergei. The loss of their mother left no mercy to their grieving hearts. Strahd dare not weep. Oh…how King Barov's ghost stood over him. His dark influence shadows Strahd even after his death. I fear for His Majesty.

Entry #12: 3/4/353

Kasimir and his people…they came to the castle today. I have not seen him in….so long. Too long. I know every corner in this castle…every creaking floorboard, every which place a mouse may hide. I found a quiet room for the two of us. We embraced.

I miss my kinfolk dearly. I miss Kasimir….*dearly*. I only hope he understands my duty. His eyes seemed distant, in thought. Although he embraced me, his mind grew troubled. He wouldn't– no, he could not tell me why. I must understand that he, too, has a duty to our people.

His sister, Patrina….she is to be betrothed to His Majesty. This troubles me.
I attempted to speak to Kasimir, under the guise of additional dues….but he refused. He refused to speak to me. His eyes…..I felt pain in them as he gazed upon me. This is not the Kasimir whom I loved before. He exiled me. Cursed me. Blamed me for his sister's "perversions".

Am I to blame?~~I~~ No, **No.** I tried to explain this to him. This is **my duty**, as he bears his own; I do, too. He wouldn't hear me. I reached out to embrace him–to explain myself, to reassure him– and he refused me. *He refused me.*

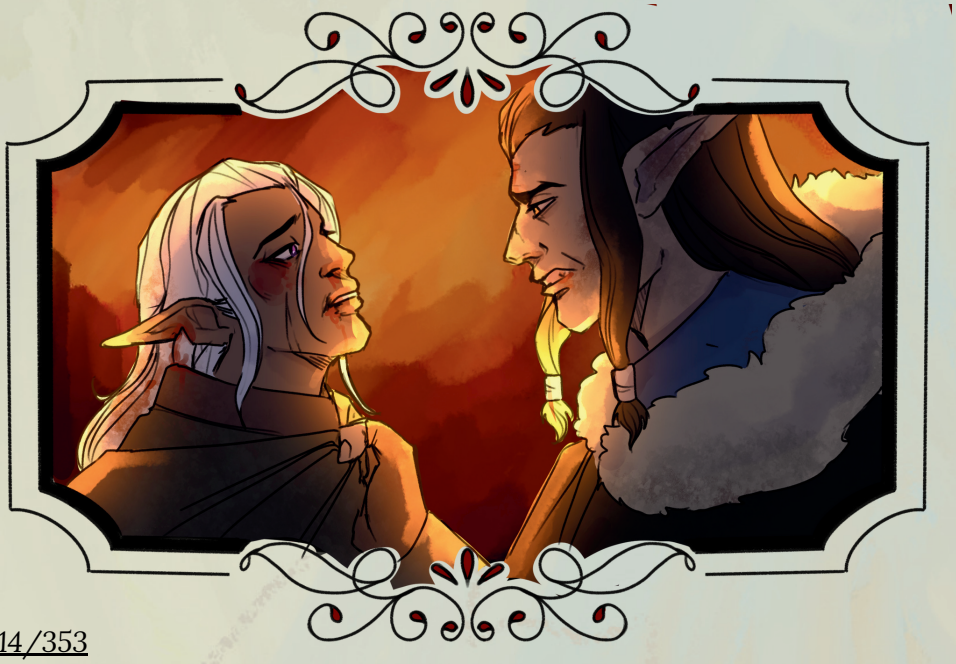
Entry #13: 4/4/353

Patrina is dead. Killed by ~~our~~….her own. I understand now. This burden…Kasimir certainly held onto this pain. To kill your own sister…I could not dare to think of it myself. My young sister now sits at home, I'm certain. Perhaps fishing by that same old lake. This must be, however, why Kasimir rejected me. Perhaps I can speak to him.

Strahd, too, is pained. I feel his grief. He cannot lose anymore. I will do what I can to assist him.

~~4/7/353~~

~~My duty as a servant of the Von Zarovich estate precedes me.~~



Entry #14 4/14/353

[This entry, stained, is barely legible]

~~….father……my hands are- they're, I am……mother……my young…..~~**FOR VON ZAROVICH**
~~Kasimir, he…so much blood…..but he…..~~My King,….Strahd commands the execution of all female Dusk Elves. ~~Kasimir…he..I promised him. I promised him our secret. Our secret since that day by the lake.~~

NEVER return, Kasimir. ~~NEVER return to the girl I met that day.~~ Promise me, Promise me.

He cursed me once more. Twice more. Thrice more. I feel their voices haunt my mind. EVERY. LAST. ONE. ~~I fear I've made a grave...no....~~I took him, enraged... "You are not one of us," he cursed me. I cursed him. His...ears...lay upon my desk now. Every last one. Every mother, every sister,

every daughter...goodbye.

I cannot lament.

For Von Zarovich.

Servant

Story by vanhelsingapologist
Art by yarrow-leaf
Character(s): Rahadin

Warnings: Child Death

☽☽☽

It had been a day's travel since Rahadin left Ravenloft.

Crossing the river had been a simple enough task, and if he had been anyone else, he might've questioned his decision to make the trek on foot. But Rahadin did not question.

The thought kept him steady as he waded, arms lifted above the rush of the water.

Questioning was a weakness of character, suited to those with no concept of responsibility and who had lived too little of a life. It was easy to question; even the lowest serf's child could ask '*why*?' as soon as they learned the intolerable word.

It was much harder to serve and forget one's personhood and dignity to honor someone else's. He supposed that made him a better soldier than most.

Rahadin admitted that it would have been a simpler thing to borrow a horse—or, gods forbid, *summon one*—but, after careful consideration, the chamberlain had opted for stealth over efficiency.

Dull as Barovians may be, their gossip traveled faster than he could. Though whispers had led him here, those same tongues could just as easily turn on him.

Besides, he assured himself, there was no point in using a horse when the wolves whimpered and slunk away at the mere stretch of his shadow. Fear was woven into the fabric of their unfortunate evolution after centuries of enduring the whistle of his blade.

Their pups were born shuddering. But once, they had been fierce.

As he climbed from the river and approached the greying door of the hovel, Rahadin could not help but think that the *quality* of the walk would have been more likely to kill him than the wolves. They had become less ravening of late, supping for too long on soft-bellied villagers.

He distinctly remembered suggesting starving them. Something to make the beasts more vicious. Strahd had dismissed his suggestion with an unpleasant curl to his lip, and Rahadin had let the thought perish there.

Though he would prefer that the wolves be more inclined to kill him than an errant root in the path, if Strahd willed it, the road would have its due faster than any wild animal could.

Rahadin's heel drove into the door, nearly splintering the plank inward. Startled eyes

immediately received him—a man with thinning hair and a woman whose lips parted to form a lopsided ‘o,’ both seated at a stained table, warm from the nearby hearth.

There was a beat of silence between the three before it became abundantly clear what was to happen. The woman’s hands nervously skimmed the napkin for her knife.

Rahadin drew his sword. Their food continued to steam.

It was a sorry thought that an uneven cobblestone would sooner be his end than a battle. Many times in his long life, the dusk elf wondered if he had unknowingly crossed the threshold into undeath. It appeared he would keep living, no matter who or what crossed swords with him.

Perhaps, he thought, as the man’s skin opened under the tip of his blade, I have merely grown soft.

The greatness of war had long left Barovia. Years of killing peasants armed with unwieldy pitchforks had grown on his sword arm like rust. After defeating the order protecting the land, they had carved through whelps and farm boys for the remainder of the conquering years. As the man’s blood leaked over the floor, Rahadin almost felt himself miss the glint of silver armor.

A blade did not grow sharper by making a whetstone of butter. He and his master had both grown complacent. Lazy.

The young woman screamed, scrambling along the floor like an animal. Rahadin paused quietly as she pulled herself into the next room, tilting his head to his shoulder.

Strahd had not been like those boys, Rahadin thought before pursuing.

His master had taken to the sword like a fish to water, but killing had not come so easily. Rahadin remembered sliding his hand between the valley of the boy’s shoulder blades, kneeling beside him as his master stared into the wild nothing, the body of a squire cooling beside him.

Rahadin had understood then what no one else could. It was not his place to question Strahd’s weaknesses. He was to protect him from them.

To serve him, even when Strahd did not realize he was doing so. ‘Love’ was too simple a word. Strahd was his duty.

He could not ensure the killing would not chip away at his master, but he could make him find pleasure in it, to avoid the sorrow that paralyzed him.

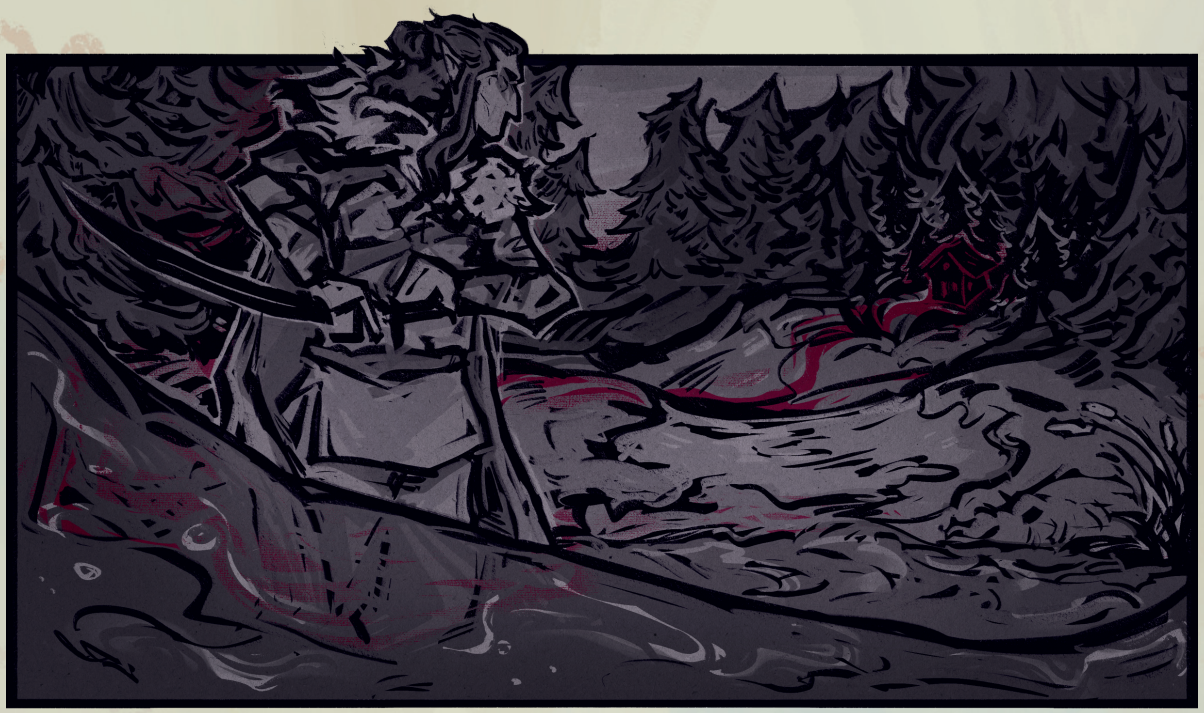
Strahd’s little bouts of melancholy had been a source of great frustration for Barov, but Rahadin understood that it was simply the way of things. Besides, most sources of his master’s stagnation could be dealt with.

Perhaps that was why he had decided to come. Perhaps it was the memory of the conquering, of what he had once been, of who he had been to Strahd. Who Strahd might’ve been, had she not twisted him.

The woman died quickly, her agonized scream winding through the air until it settled among the choir he had maintained so diligently. Rahadin exhaled through his nose, the corner of his mouth pulling into a sneer as the reason for the woman's flight became evident.

The tips of her fingers had smeared blood down the front of the dresser where she'd desperately reached out to push a drawer shut. The dusk elf knelt, considering the drawer for a moment while he wiped the flat of his scimitar on the woman's blouse.

A thin, reedy wail briefly mingled with the awful screams echoing in his ears.



He hissed, displeased, and stalked towards the drawer, setting his scimitar atop the dresser and yanking it open. A baby squalled up at him, squirming within the small space her mother had attempted to conceal her in.

Rahadin's heart stilled as she clenched and unclenched her fists, spit bubbling at the sides of her lips as he carefully lifted her into his arms.

She reached for him, and he instinctively pulled her from his chest. A laugh crawled in his throat at the irony.

While Strahd had been strong–if not briefly taken by fits of emotion–Rahadin suspected that Sergei had been more like this. Sickly.

Whether he would have grown out of his carefree arrogance and willful abandonment of his commitments under Rahadin's tutelage, the dusk elf could not begin to say.

He had been on campaign, slogging through a muddy battlefield when Strahd had made him aware of Sergei's existence. Sergei would continue to make his existence known through Ravenovia's letters to her eldest, her impeccable, looping script detailing the curls in his hair

and the whites of his eyes.

He supposed he might have loved him, given time. He had sworn his oaths, and with their parents dead, someone had to ensure the Von Zaroviches were protected from whoever wished them ill, if not from themselves.

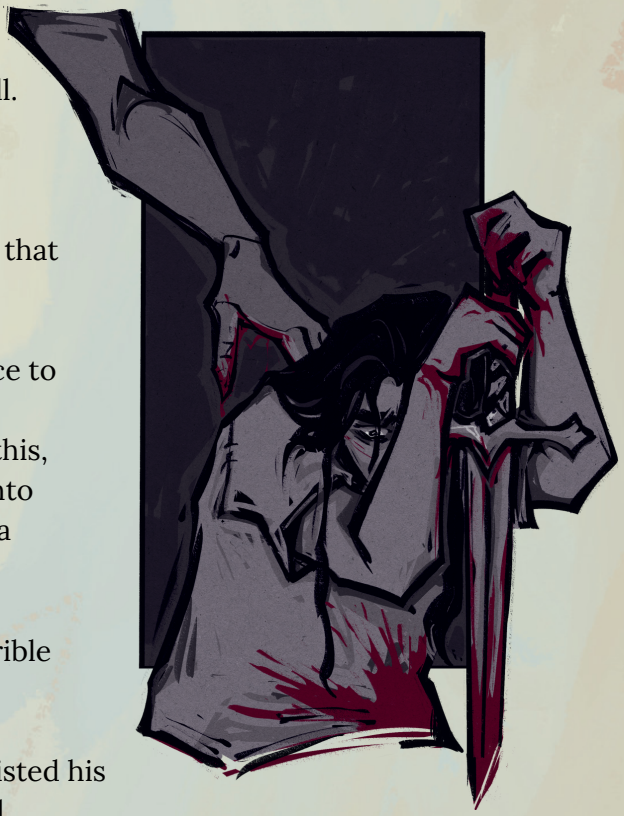
Yet, by bringing the woman to Ravenloft, Sergei had upset the delicate ecosystem Rahadin had fought to preserve.

She had been utterly unremarkable to Rahadin's eye, save for the odd luster of her red hair. Still, the brothers had become ensnared. She had not been clever enough to mastermind such fortune, so Rahadin had been forced to confront that her allure was that of a riptide.

Strahd no longer took pleasure in his successes, dwelling in the disaster of his age. He grew restless, pining after the love of a thing who had amounted to little in her life.

In some small way, he was relieved that Sergei and the farm girl were to be wed. It signified an inevitable end and left loyalties intact.

Then again, if not for the girl, Strahd would not have had to kill him. He would not have broken the dusk elf's vows to their father in a single night. If Rahadin had not been who he was, he might have asked Strahd why he did not think of him before driving the knife in.



If there was one thing he had gotten wrong, it was that he had taught him to love killing too well.

But what was done was done.

There was one Von Zarovich left to serve, even if that Von Zarovich served no one but death.

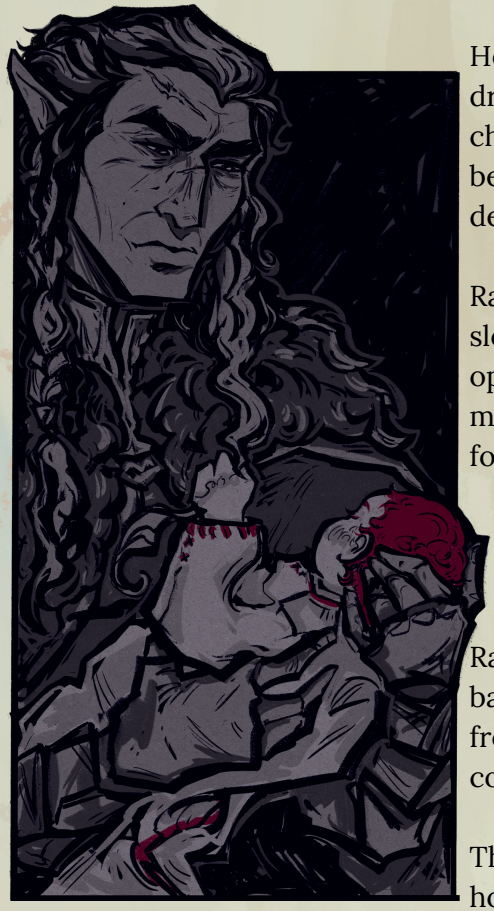
In one last gift to them both, the girl had the grace to jump from the highest parapet she could upon discovering Strahd's act of desperation. Despite this, she continued to torment him, forcing her way into the world again and again. A priestess, a pauper, a wildwoman, a noble.

For every life she lived, each death was more terrible than the next, leaving Strahd listless and morose. The rot of the valley grew, and Strahd stagnated, withdrawing and rotting with it. Undeath had twisted his lord beyond recognition, but still, Rahadin served.

And what could Strahd do but be drawn to the flame, abandoning reason and obligation to his people for the ghost of the life he had made that terrible bargain for? The girl was a weakness—and a powerful one at that.

For all of his lord's assumptions, it had become abundantly clear to Rahadin that he and his brother shared more than they differed.

The baby squirmed in the dusk elf's arms, startling him from his reverie. The familiar taste of iron clung to his tongue, so thick was the warmth of the cooling blood in the air. He wondered if she could taste it as well.



He quietly stepped over her mother's body, letting his hand drift over the baby's soft, fleshy nose. He had been close to children before, and the impermanence of their skulls had been an inelegant discovery. It was like they were utterly determined not to live.

Rahadin ghosted his fingers over her auburn eyelashes, slowly dragging them closed before she popped them back open, as if her eyelids were operated by a spring. The movement startled her out of her whimpering long enough for him to draw the knife from his belt.

It is only an embarrassing gurgle of blood, and then it is over. Insignificant, and over.

Rahadin placed the baby by her mother's body and stepped back over them to retrieve his blade, disappearing into the front room. The hearth was still warm. The food was considerably less so.

The dusk elf thought of the bland porridge awaiting him at home—an unhappy meal he often threw together before an equally bland task—as he held their flimsy curtains to the flames until they caught. The memory of the girl was already distant and blurry.

And Strahd would not understand.

Strahd would not see why he had done it, and he likely never would. Then again, Strahd had served no one but death for many years.

There was no need to trouble him with the knowledge. He would live these next years in peaceful slumber or governance, without the burden of love to drag him from duty.

And perhaps one day, he would wake to find that the memory of the girl had blurred for him as well. He may even thank him.

Rahadin stepped off the front stoop and moved to the river, watching until the wood walls of the cabin were brighter than morning.

For the first time in four hundred years, the bank was swathed with light.

What the Devil doesn't Know

Story by ChurchyardGrim
Art by IvoryScribbles
Character(s): Van Richten, Lyssa von Zarovich

☽☽☽

"I hope you appreciate what I am risking," the Vampire says.

She is small. Dainty. A cultured, sharp-featured face, framed by gentle curls of a brown shading nearly to black. Her visiting gown is trimmed with fur, sliding softly over the upholstery as she takes her seat across from him. Expensive, well cared-for, in the style of Barovian nobility. What little of it remains.

Rudolph van Richten pushes his glasses further up his nose, his face carefully impassive. "I could say the same."

The Vampire's mouth twitches, unreadably so. They two are seated, a calculated ten feet apart, in the well-appointed study of a rented townhouse in Zeidenburg. The heavy curtains are drawn against the dark of the night beyond, giving the space an air of seclusion. The firelight lends a warmth to her complexion that Van Richten knows is not naturally present, and the smell of worn leather upholstery and books goes some small way towards easing his own trepidations.

It might seem foolish to an outsider, the tension the good Doctor carries in his shoulders and the corners of his eyes. For all anyone outside this room knows, his guest is simply a young noblewoman of marrying age, patron to half the town. Surely the worst that could befall either of them is the minor scandal of such a clandestine, and unchaperoned, meeting.

"Of course," Lady Lyssa von Zarovich says softly. "Mutual risk, for the sake of mutual benefit." The hunter inclines his head.

Such things had taken up a good portion of their shared letters over the years. Discussions of natural philosophy and biomancy, of alchemy and politics; a cautious exchange of information gradually growing more animated as the Lady Lyssa had proven herself trustworthy. She's ferociously intelligent, and an excellent source of intel – and, more than that, willing to work with a hunter of her own kind.

None of which was *quite* enough to quench Van Richten's hard-earned vigilance and suspicion, when the time came to meet in person. Some things are simply too delicate to trust to letters... but it is still very hard to forget that the petite young woman opposite him could put him through the wall with a slap, if she so chose.

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Beside him is a small table, laid with the tools of transcription. Van Richten opens a small notebook over his knee, takes up his pen, and begins to write as he narrates aloud, "Eighteenth of Harvester, an interview with–"

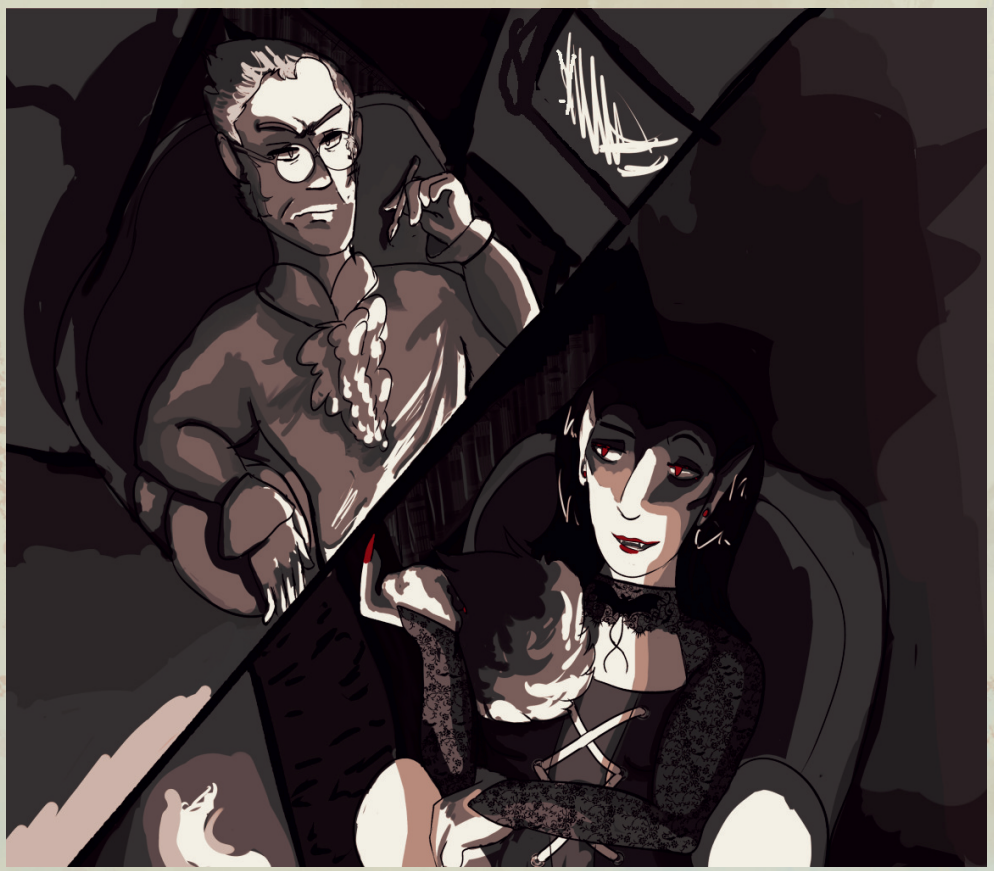
"Doctor, please," his guest interrupts; hands momentarily fluttering like birds. "Surely you keep your research under strictest confidence, but I still must insist against my name being recorded!"

Van Richten raises an eyebrow. "Really? You are that afraid of being found out, Lady Lyssa?"

He gets the very strong impression that if his guest could have flushed pink, she would have. "The consequences would be– dire. Trust me when I say that I have tasted enough of my Elder's wrath to be wary of courting any more of it."

The Hunter's lips purse, but he puts quill to paper again and says, "An alias, then." *Tristana Noapte*. His little joke. "So the risk you take is twofold, then. Risk from myself, and all I know... and risk from your own kind."

Lyssa meets his eyes again, gleaming faintly scarlet in the firelight. "I could argue that the latter danger is the more dire," she murmurs. "He is... vengeful."



So *am* I, Van Richten does not say. A decade ago, the Lady von Zarovich had been a fixture of Zeidenburg's high society, when she was not traveling mysteriously abroad. Her sudden reclusive habits had puzzled the gentry, but the consensus was that she had simply taken ill, and now it is old news that few see her anymore. A green Hunter following the rumors would naturally assume that this shift in behavior marks the plunge into undeath... but the genealogy does not support that.

For the Von Zarovich family tree marks the only child born to Ana and Todd von Zarovich as nearly two hundred years previous.

Van Richten taps his pen, businesslike. "Your... Elder. I confess I have little patience and less skill for *tact* at this time, so I will ask plainly. Is it your Elder the Count who carries the blame for your Vampirism?"

Lyssa's head tilts, as if considering the question. "Mm, no. I suppose you could call me a *self-made woman*, in that respect."

Van Richten's flat expression does not change. Lyssa, politely, hides her amusement behind a milk-white hand. "Oh, forgive me – here. I will say it your way." She clears her throat, that little smile still in place as if the stating of plain truths entertains her. "I came to undeath of my own will, under my own power, and without the knowledge or involvement of any other of my kind."

The doctor's gaze, which had dipped again to his notebook, snaps up sharply. Such things are

not impossible, but... "Elaborate."

Lyssa hesitates, as if unsure of how much to say; but she must have known he would ask, and must have come here intending to answer.

"There are... I am reluctant to name them *creatures*," she begins. "Entities, perhaps – with which certain bargains can be made. Not demons nor devils, I assure you, but something far more... ephemeral. I sought them out, and did what they asked. And in return..." She gestures, simply, at herself.

Van Richten's pen is suddenly in danger of tearing through the paper, *familiarity* crawling at the back of his skull. She...

"...dare I ask *why* you would do such a thing to yourself?"

Lyssa is silent for a moment, as if choosing very carefully how to answer. At last, she meets his eye. "For freedom, Doctor."

This time, it is Van Richten who looks away first.

"And how," he asks, after another long moment of wrestling with his words, "did you come by such knowledge?" If she means what she implies...

Lyssa smiles, close-lipped; like a masterwork portrait. "I think you know, Doctor. My greatuncle has long neglected the ordering of his library. I daresay his journal is still where I left it."

An exhale, silent as a moth's wings. Well. That answers that.

"Fell business," the hunter mutters. "Wish I'd never read the damn thing. Though I suppose you've headed off my next question; the Count would be your... grandfather's brother, yes?"

Lyssa nods. "His younger brother. Not *him*, no," she adds with a small laugh, seeing the look on her host's face. "My grandfather was the oft-forgotten middle brother, Sturm von Zarovich."

Her expression... softens, a little. Something like nostalgia creeping in. "He died when I was twenty, and I consider it a mercy that he never knew the truth of the family's decline."

Van Richten can find no fault in *that*, at least.

And Lyssa seems reluctant to linger on the topic, flitting to another like a bird. "I confess myself impressed, though, that you managed to infiltrate Castle Ravenloft so effectively. Few others of your kind could do so and return unchanged."

"My kind?" Van Richten's gaze sharpens. "Mortals?"

"Oh, no!" Lyssa hides a small smile, as if amused. "Hunters."

"Hm." Van Richten makes a note, his expression carefully impassive. Though he says, almost as

an afterthought, "I accomplished less than I would have preferred, that day."

It might be sympathy, in her eyes. Or the illusion of it. "It is a pity, yes. I daresay many would have breathed a sigh of relief, had you done what you set out to do. As distasteful as I find wanton murder, even I must concede that it is– necessary, at times."

Van Richten's face does something interesting. "Your definition of necessity," he says, thinly, "still leaves much to be desired."

This is a sore point, for the both of them. Much ink has already been spilled on the subject, and if Lyssa had come here hoping to avoid a rehashing of it – well.

But she only sighs, hands like pale spiders folded demurely in her lap. "Oh, I know well your feelings on the matter, Doctor. Still, I wish you could see it as I do. We are *unnatural*, you might say, but the truth is the relationship between Vampires and humanity is mirrored all the world over. The rabbits and the deer will surely tell horror stories of the wolf, and yet the wolf speaks with such anguish about *starvation*."

The comparison catches Van Richten unpleasantly, and his mouth thins. His guest tilts her head almost imploringly, and asks, "You know, don't you, what becomes of a Vampire left too long without sustenance?"

A low grunt of acknowledgement. "I've seen the aftermath of it, yes."

Lyssa nods, one ruby earring sparkling in the firelight. "It is– torment. And more than that, it robs us of our reason. Can you blame us, then, for doing what we must only to survive? Have we not the right, as much as the wolves have?"

Van Richten, rather generously, he thinks, does not mention how many of his countrymen would say that no, no the wolf does not have the right. Instead he sniffs and says, "Deer do not readily sit down to chat with wolves, I find. Your metaphor is lacking."

Lyssa only spreads her hands, magnanimously. "It cannot cover everything. But the essentials, dear Doctor, hold true."

Van Richten sighs, raising a hand to massage the knot forming between his brows. "Essentials or not, you cannot ignore the issue of scale. Humankind governs itself, there are rules – and those that violate them are beholden to their communities, their Burgomasters, their confessors. What would you have us do, drag a Vampire before the courts?"

"Why not?"

The question catches him off guard, and he sputters outright. "Why– what Vampire would go along with it?!" He gesticulates, in disbelief. "No chains exist that could bind one of your kin for long, no bailiff is immune to the– influence of your voice. Vampires laugh at the law, and at the hangman."

Lyssa's ruby lips purse, and she tilts her head almost thoughtfully. She's infuriatingly hard to read, he's realizing; a politician's face, giving little away. "And man doesn't? Look around you," she gestures, gracefully, at the shelves that line the parlor walls; crowded with leatherbound books left over from the previous, erudite occupant. "You say that our ledgers of murder are too long, too red to be given due process, but the history books themselves are naught but the same. Warriors, conquerers, great heroes and glorious villains – all guilty of the same! I have studied humankind as astutely as you have the undead, and I assure you, I speak truth."

Van Richten bristles, momentarily stunned at the audacity. "You– that is a bold play, Lady. And one without any point at all! Do you think I am ignorant of what my own kind is capable of?" A carriage vanishing into the night, a Vistana's sworn vengeance– he shakes his head, sharply. "But I have never, never seen a mere mortal man empty a village overnight."

Lyssa is quiet a moment, seeming to watch him. She doesn't breathe, Van Richten notices belatedly. Of course she wouldn't, he knows that, she'll only need air to speak and in these quiet moments the habit lapses, but knowing it and seeing it are two different things...

When at last she speaks, her voice is soft as candlelight. "It frightens you, doesn't it?"

The question makes his head jerk back. "What?"

"The... effortlessness of our violence."

There is iron in his spine; it does not bend. "My Lady, I have seen men torn apart. Seduced and overcome in an instant, and slit open like fish. I would be a fool not to be frightened of such

"But I implore you to recognize this fear for what it is. Do not the peasants of Tepest abuse their own who are suspected of witchcraft? Even here in my own home, my people name wizardry an anathema." Her expression is– pitying, Van Richten realizes. Pity, that crawls up his esophagus like a spider. "But the arcane is not anathema, just as Vampires are not singly monstrous; even if the deer cannot see it–"

"Hang the deer!"

Van Richten is– on his feet, shouting now. He hadn't meant to do that. But his anger's boiled over now, too many little insults to bear, and for all the Vampire across from him looks surprised at his outburst, it is not enough to make his manner any less than icy. "Hang the bloody deer. Have you any idea– to sit there and name me and mine prey, and expect–!"

Breath hisses out between his teeth, and Van Richten turns on his heel and fills his vision with bookcases instead of the Vampire across from him. The grief is rising again, a black tide in his lungs, and he should stop this before he does something stupid but–

"Worse than the violence, worse than the power – is what your kind does to people. Death itself is not so cruel! Oh yes, many things may snatch a loved one from life – happenstance, malice, fate – but none of them send them back again after. Red-eyed and hungry, to torment the grieving and drag them down as well!"

Something is tearing round the inside of his skull, a black rage trembling in his limbs; Erasmus' eyes, wine-colored and pleading for the stake–

"You ruined him," Van Richten whispers, in a voice thick with hate. "He was– perfect. And you..."

"Me?"

The present moment flies up and smacks him in the face. Lyssa has not risen, though she looks an instant away from doing so, and Van Richten's animal hindbrain stiffens in abrupt recognition of what he is sharing a room with. A vibration of anger in the very air–

"Doctor Van Richten, I sympathize with your loss, and with your anger – Gods only know you are not alone in such things."

Her voice is– icy, clipped and precise as her noble status demands. "But I have come here under the aegis of alliance, Doctor! In the spirit of fellowship – I do not deserve your ire!"

That brings him up short. She's bristling at him, like a cornered cat, all barely-five-feet of her, and he gets the very strong impression she's refraining from baring fangs at him. Fortunate...

But the shock of it still buys his brain time to catch up to his anger, and garrotte it from behind. Van Richten draws breath, sets his jaw, and looks away first.

"...forgive me," he says, brusquely, and stumbles back to his chair. His knee protests his sitting, but eases up once the weight's off it.

He does not notice – does not know to look for the signs – just how afraid his guest had been under her mantling defense.

As it is, Lady Lyssa is slow to relax. She watches Van Richten with guarded wariness until he sighs and turns to a fresh page in his notebook. "Let's– leave talk of deer and wolves behind us, for now. I remember, last spring, you mentioned the subtleties of how age affects a Vampire's strengths, and I've since had an encounter you may be interested to hear of..."

The atmosphere in the room warms, slowly, over the next hour or so. Van Richten's notebook slowly fills up, and Lyssa eventually produces one of her own to jot down a point or two she wishes to follow up on. She's a fresh contact who can corroborate her studies of Vampiric age, she says. A sun elf, whose Vampirism predates even Strahd's own...

The Consequence of Devotion

Story by shaungilmore
Art by redspleen
Character(s): Strahd, Alek

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The gathering storm – having started as whispers of wind near the peaks of Mount Ghakis but by now having become malignant clouds ready to engulf the rest of the night sky at a moment's notice – might be considered an omen of ill fortune by some. Alek Gwilym, however, is not prone to superstition. Although the years spent as Strahd's right-hand man, closest confidant, and – although he knows the other man would never admit it – dearest friend have left him not altogether free of habitual paranoia, this near-irrationality is reserved only for the actions, thoughts, and motives of his fellow man; he will leave the interpretations of that which lies beyond the physical to priests, soothsayers, and midwives.

It is the motives, or schemes, of his fellow man that have led Alek to go outside under the threat of worsening weather. For quite some time now, he has been attempting to find out people's loyalties, as Strahd had ordered, and he only hopes he has not found out the truth too late. Things have already been set in motion – what better occasion than tomorrow's wedding would one be able to find? – and he needs to warn Strahd.

Of course, it is also important that other people remain unaware. He knows very well how valuable knowledge and the element of surprise are. If that traitor were to find out he has been uncovered, he might change his plans. Therefore, no one can know that he is speaking to Strahd. Despite there being other possible reasons for him to be going to Strahd's chambers at this late hour – and most people would assume motives that have been true in the past – to a scheming mind there would only be one option: the truth. Alek knows the truth and soon Strahd will as well.

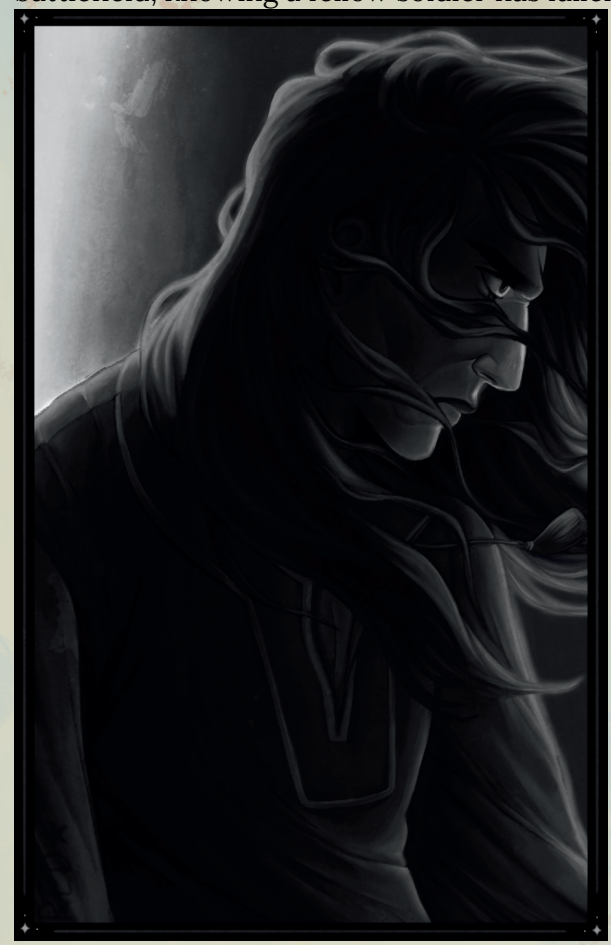
Alek already feels satisfaction and pride swell within him at a job well-done. He knows Strahd will be angry at first – not at him, but his wounded ego might make him lash out. However, after that, and after a quick strategic discussion – and he suspects he'll be able to answer about

half of Strahd's orders with an 'Already taken care of' – he'll get to see the elusive sight of Strahd's smile. Perhaps Strahd himself is not even aware of that particular expression. He's only seen it in private, and it's such a slight upturn of the corners of his lips that most would dismiss it as meaningless if they ever even got the chance to see it, but it's a fleeting moment of honesty that Alek treasures. A brief moment of respite where Strahd will allow himself to feel relief before he sets about his business again. Alek strives to create as many of those moments as possible. He suspects that he the only one who can.

He is so caught up in this anticipation that he almost doesn't notice something is off, but an old soldier's intuition is not something that fades away. He does not know what he senses – nothing appears wrong on the surface, but he knows better than to ignore this feeling. So, he is quiet as he approaches the open window.

He listens.

Strahd's voice is low and distant, talking to someone in his study. No, not someone. Something. Alek does not hear the other speak, but in the moments of silence, with only the sound of falling rain as his company, he feels an all-too-familiar dread. The feeling one gets on the battlefield, knowing a fellow soldier has fallen before seeing their corpse. The feeling one gets



before opening a letter, sensing a family member has died before actually reading the words.

The feeling one gets when a dear companion crosses the point of no return.

Strahd has been acting strange lately. Alek has noted this change, this decline, but all his time away, determining people's loyalties, means he hasn't had time to do anything about it. And now, both of them will pay the price, because nothing has changed about Alek's.

Still, he ought not to give away that he knows. He will come to Strahd with his own information, just like he'd planned, and he'll act from there. Perhaps this course can still be altered. He steps away from the window and—

The sound of metal scraping against stone. He tenses at first, expecting a foe to have snuck up on him, but then he realises it is his own stupidity. And Strahd has most certainly heard him. Perhaps there is time to step away, make it seem like he has just arrived, but he is perhaps only five yards away when he hears Strahd come out.

Alek turns around, attempting to hide his inner turmoil, though he can immediately tell Strahd is not fooled.

'My lord?' Alek calls, his voice nearly swept away by the increasing winds. 'Forgive me, but I came to tell you—'

Strahd approaches, blade already drawn. 'What?'

Alek flinches. For the first time in eighteen years, he's scared of Strahd. Of the man Strahd has become.

And Strahd notices.

Alek is only barely quick enough to parry the blow aimed at his head.

'No, Strahd! Do not—' He parries another attack. 'Strahd, I beg of you, there is no need for this!' Alek can barely hear his own words, so he doubts they reach Strahd's ears. With the darkness and the storm, no one but the two of them will know what transpires here. Not even the moon will bear witness.

Alek attempts to retreat to the corner turret, hoping against hope that the proximity of other people might snap Strahd out of his current state, but he is cut off.

'Don't do this, my friend. I'm not your enemy,' he pleads, but his plea goes unheard.

All those years of devotion, and now, he will be put down like a loyal lapdog that's outlived his usefulness.

He has to fight back. After his next parry, he does not fall back but counters as if Strahd were just one more nameless, faceless enemy. It pains him to do so, but if he is to die here, he won't go down without a fight. He knows Strahd would not have it any other way – the Strahd he knows, at least.

The clang of weapons – sword and dagger, blocked and dodged in equal measure – is accompanied by the drum of thunder, the men timing their movement to the flashes of lightning. Alek has one advantage over Strahd: he is wearing gloves, while Strahd is not. Alek attempts to disarm him, Strahd's grip on his sword more easily weakened by the deluge of rain, though his attempt is thwarted; still, he presses on, going with the motion, and his dagger strikes true.

He only realises what he's done when another flash of lightning reveals the red stains on Strahd's white shirt. It's clearly a fatal blow. Alek watches Strahd realise the same a heartbeat later as his knees buckle under him.

Alek hesitates.

With strength that should be impossible for a dying man, Strahd strikes once more, and Alek does not see it coming. He cries out, dropping his dagger to reach for the searing pain in his stomach. Dishonourable, but Alek has not shown honour either in striking down his lord.

The sword hurts even more when Strahd draws it out, the blade falling next to the dropped dagger.

Alek could finish this. He sits down gracelessly as his strength leaves him. He could finish this, but it feels wrong. He would die as the victor, but this does not feel like victory. No. He lets his weapon go, settling onto the wet stones of the overlook.

He's killed Strahd, and Strahd has killed him. Perhaps it is a fitting ending for two old soldiers ill-suited to peace. They will die together. The only together they will have. Could ever have.

He feels Strahd crawl closer to him.

‘Didn’t have to, my lord,’ Alek says through the taste of iron.

People say your life flashes before your eyes in the moment before your death.

The only flashes Alek sees are lightning.

No happier moments.

Just two dying men.

‘I’d have helped you… no matter what. This… did not… have to be.’

‘I’m afraid it did.’

Alek coughs, nearly choking on his own blood. ‘Should have let me die on the mountain… spared me from seeing this.’

‘Alek—’

What had he come here for again?

A warning?

He clutches at Strahd.

Warn him?

‘Traitor in… the camp…’

A bottle of wine, tasting it to draw out Strahd’s impatience.

Teasing him.

‘Ba’al Verzi…’

A plot against him.

It’s not wrong, but it’s not right.

He can’t find the words.

Can’t find the thoughts.

All he can do is—

‘…sleep.’

Perhaps it is kinder that Alek does not know what happens next. That he finds some peace in

unconsciousness before passing on. That now he does live his memories, briefly.

Strahd takes Alek's second dagger.

Alek remembers their meeting, stubbornness clashing before finding respect.

Strahd drags the dagger across Alek's throat.

Alek remembers the comfort soldiers find together in the night, not spoken of during the day.

Strahd drinks from the fresh wound.

Alek remembers loyalty, devotion, never finding the right moment.

Strahd lives.

Alek dies.

Omnia · vincit · amor

ANTICHRIST-VEVO
INNOCENT

REGVLVS SERGEI V·ZAROVICH
SVA LVX EXCRV CIATA
MAGISTER MATV TINVS
PRIMVS HVIVS NOMINIS

xdhx

The Hanged Man

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